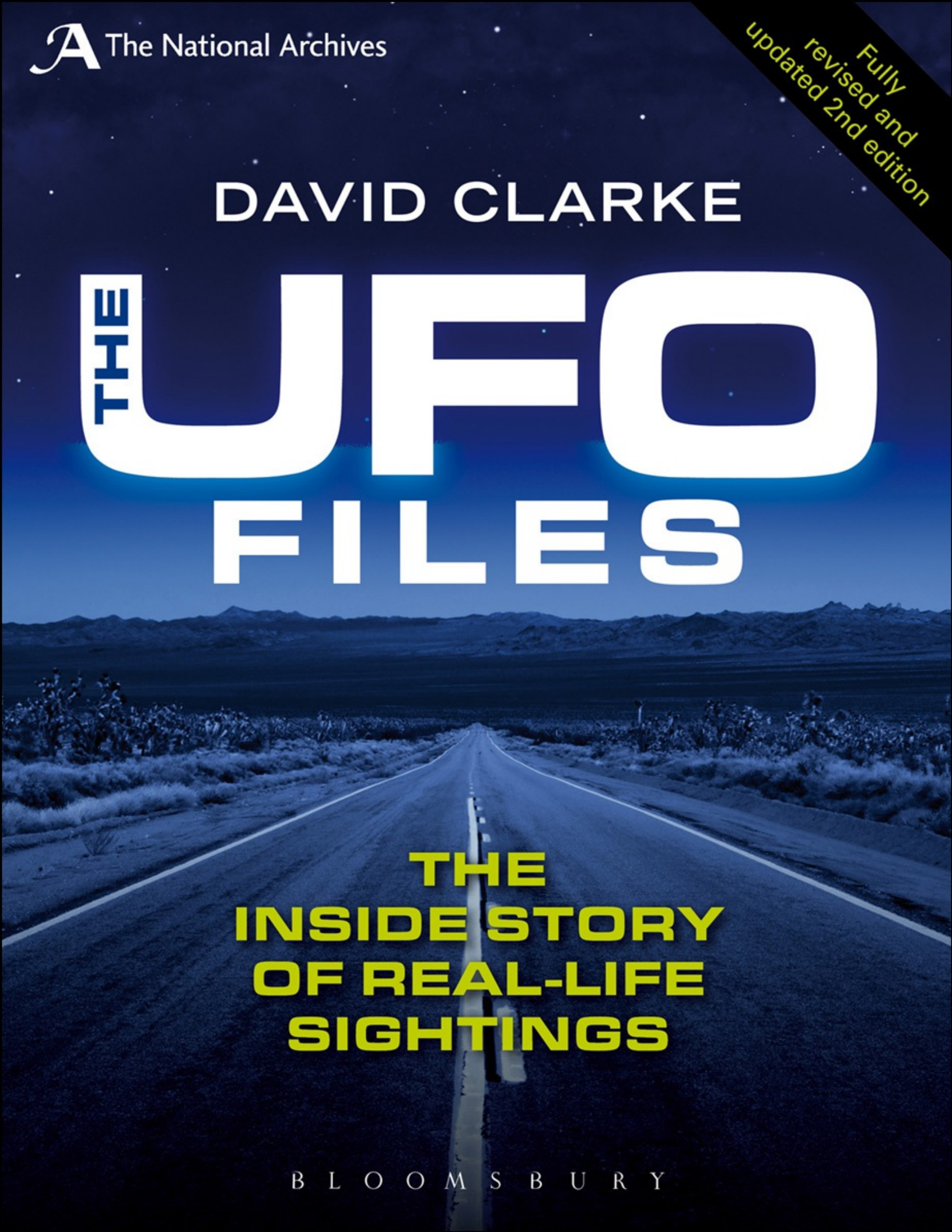
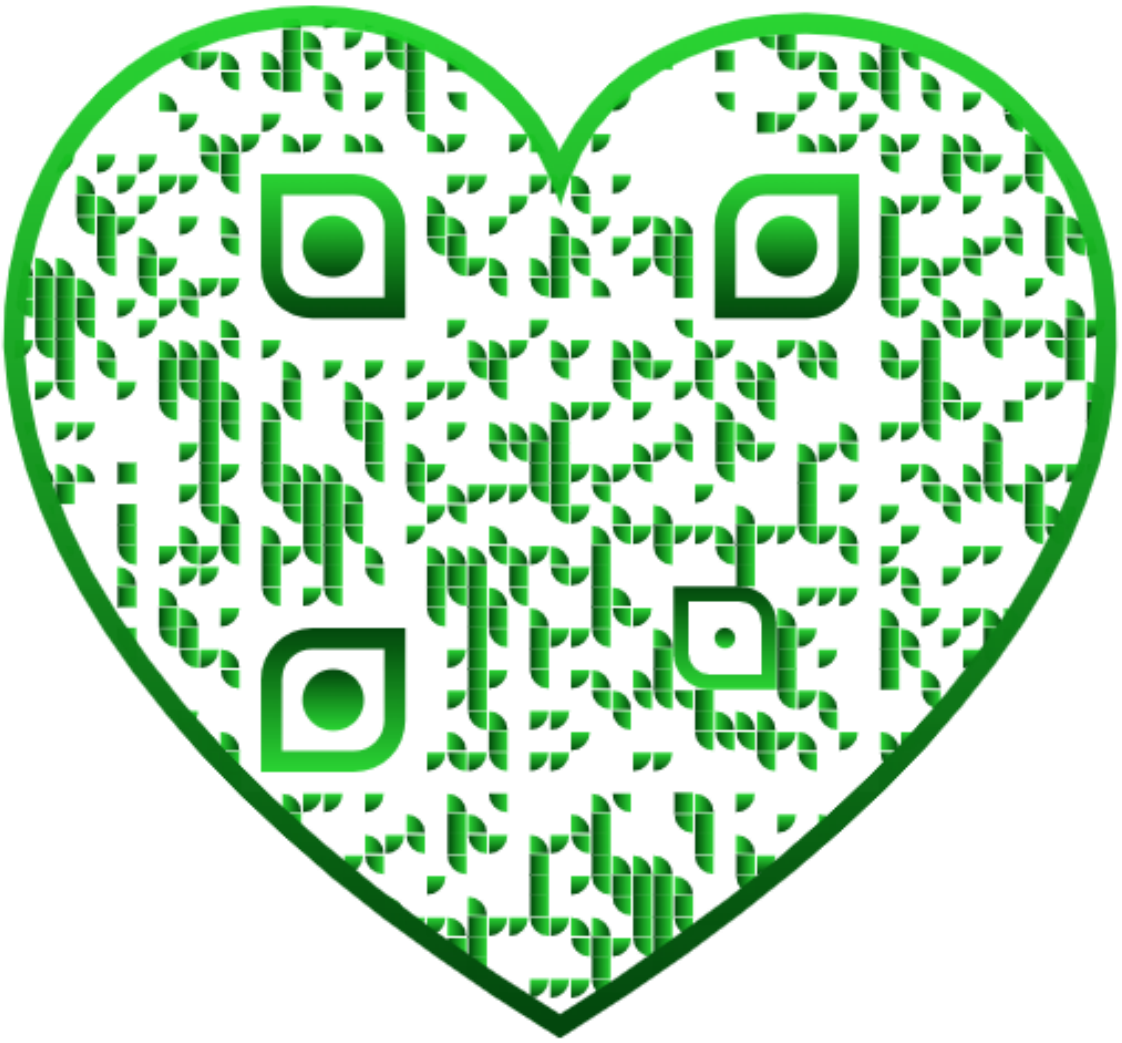

The National Archives
Fully revised and updated 2nd edition
DAVID CLARKE
THE UFO FILES
THE INSIDE STORY OF REAL-LIFE SIGHTINGS
BLOOMSBURY



THE UFO FILES

THE INSIDE STORY OF REAL-LIFE SIGHTINGS

SECOND EDITION

DAVID CLARKE

The National Archives
BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

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Introduction
Extraordinary Sightings by Ordinary People

This book is based upon the real-life accounts of UFO sightings recorded in files collected by Britain's Ministry of Defence (MoD), which are today held by The National Archives, based at Kew, Richmond. The phrase 'close encounter' was coined by an astronomer, Dr J. Allen Hynek, who acted as consultant to the US Air Force's UFO Project Blue Book between 1952 and 1969. He defined the typical UFO experience as 'a statement by a person or persons judged responsible and psychologically normal, describing an object or light in the sky' that could not be explained by any obvious physical or psychological cause.[1]

In the aftermath of the Second World War some countries, such as the United States, Canada and Great Britain, established official projects to collect and scrutinise unusual sighting reports for any clues that might suggest UFOs could be a threat to national security. In Britain, these were investigated by the Air Ministry and the MoD. But for many years the only publicly available information about the British government's UFO unit was its name, Secretariat Air Staff 2 or Sec(AS)2. The MoD's UFO files are often referred to as 'Britain's real X-Files' after the popular 90s TV show The X-Files, which chronicled the adventures of maverick FBI agents Fox Mulder and Dana Scully. The two fictional agents fought a battle with sinister forces who were determined to close down their investigations of strange phenomena. The overall theme of the series was summed up by an iconic poster in Mulder's office that featured an image of a 'flying saucer' with the caption: 'I want to believe.'

The X-Files phenomenon reflected a widespread belief in the existence of extraterrestrial life that has grown since the end of the Second World War. Flying saucers were first sighted in 1947, but just seven years later an opinion poll for a London newspaper found that 16 per cent of Britons believed in them. The Cold War saw the launch of the Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) and the success of the Apollo programme that put men on the moon. By the fiftieth anniversary of the UFO, another poll revealed that one

third of the 1,092 adults questioned believed aliens had visited Earth – and 21 of them claimed to have had a direct experience with E.T.!

Regardless of whether UFOs actually exist in the popular sense of flying saucers from other worlds, the subject is unquestionably part of our social and cultural history. The MoD files provide both an insight into UFO beliefs themselves and a unique database of reports from those who have seen them.

The files contain the stories, many first-hand, of ordinary people from all walks of life who have undergone extraordinary and often life-changing experiences. They usually take the form of short accounts submitted by phone or letter by those who felt they should report what they had seen to the authorities. UFO witnesses include people of all ages and professions, from schoolchildren and refuse collectors to police officers and RAF pilots.

The first surprise to emerge from the files is that although the terms 'flying saucer' and 'UFO' date from post 1945 era, the chronological spread of the documents actually begins before the First World War. They range from strange sightings made in the early 1900s and during both world wars, to the first reports of 'flying saucers' during the late 1940s and 1950s, to contemporary accounts of stealthy, triangular-shaped craft. There are a great variety of stories and some are far more credible than others. Some describe the classic lights and shapes in the sky that were categorised as close encounters of the first kind by Dr Hynek. Others involve close encounters of the second kind, where some form of physical evidence – such as marks on the ground or photographs – have been left behind. A small number describe encounters of the third kind: sightings of UFO occupants and even alleged 'alien abductions'.

The most recent of these documents were opened to the public under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in a four-year programme that ended in 2012. The Ministry of Defence described the release as a major exercise that was 'unique in MoD history'. Their aim was that greater openness would help counter what they described as 'the maze of rumour and frequently ill-informed speculation' that surrounded their involvement, both real and imagined, in the UFO mystery. But for those who suspected a whitewash, many questions remained. What did the files contain that justified them being kept secret for so many years? Why was government releasing them now? And how can we be sure these files really do contain the truth? This book is both an account of my attempt to answer those questions and a history of official investigations into the UFO mystery in the United Kingdom. During the past decade I have

methodically ploughed through every surviving UFO-related file held by The National Archives, including all the records on 12,000 sightings recorded in official files since 1962. Between 2008 and 2012 I was the consultant and media spokesman for The National Archives' project that prepared the most recent files for release. This high-profile role was the culmination of my own personal quest to discover what the British government really knew about UFOs.

I first became gripped by the UFO bug in 1978 on seeing Steven Spielberg's movie Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Inspired by the true-life experiences upon which the movie was supposed to be based, I joined a UFO society and began to collect accounts of sightings. But my first close encounter with the 'real X-files' happened a decade later when I was a rookie journalist. In 1988 hundreds of people in the Midlands and North of England reported seeing strange lights and objects in the sky. After writing about these experiences for my newspaper, I compiled a dossier of the most impressive eye-witness reports and decided to send it to the fabled 'UFO desk' at Whitehall.

I was aware, from the UFO literature, that a 'UFO desk' had existed since the 1950s and knew that its name had changed occasionally following reorganisations of the MoD. Some UFO 'experts' had even described it as the British equivalent of the US Air Force's UFO investigation unit, Project Blue Book, which closed in 1969. But due to the British government's obsession with secrecy, no one really knew much about Sec(AS)2. The polite reply I received from this mysterious unit in 1988 was signed by the desk officer at the time, Clive Neville.[2] The letter said the MoD had only a 'passing interest' in UFO reports. There was, he explained, no department within the MoD that was solely responsible for the investigation of sightings or anyone employed full-time to investigate sightings, so any comparison with Project Blue Book was misleading. Their only concern was to decide if UFOs 'present a threat to the security and defence of the United Kingdom'. Reports were forwarded to 'specialist staff' in other branches responsible for the air defence of the UK for examination. But unless clear evidence of a threat was identified, 'and this is not normally the case', no attempt was made to investigate or categorise them.

Mr Neville said the information held in the MoD files was 'limited to the brief details of the sightings passed on to us by those who witnessed the phenomena.' Most disappointing of all, the letter claimed the MoD had never

carried out any study ‘into the scientific importance of these phenomena’. I soon realised that Neville’s letter followed a standard template sent out to members of the public since at least 1955. It is therefore no surprise that those who suspected the MoD knew far more about UFOs than it was prepared to admit, smelled a cover-up. But before the arrival of Freedom of Information, there was simply no way that anyone from outside the MoD could check if the official line was true or false. Allegations of cover-up came not just from the small minority of UFOlogists (as those who studied UFO sightings are known). Occasionally MPs, peers of the realm and even aircrew who witnessed unexplained phenomena in the sky had gone on record to claim the public were being misled by government denials.

Secrecy provides a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Layers of it surrounded many aspects of military operations and intelligence during the Cold War and the MoD’s interest in UFOs was no exception. My first correspondence with the ‘UFO desk’ made me even more determined to discover if there was any truth behind the claims made by the conspiracy industry. I was convinced that persistence, along with the careful use of new legislation that made access to official documents possible, could help me to peel back the layers of mystery that engulfed government interest in UFOs.

I soon realised that for much of the twentieth century the British public had no automatic right to examine any government papers. Individual requests for access to files relating to UFOs were treated in exactly the same way as those for any other category of public record, from hospital records to MPs’ expenses. Enquirers were told all government papers were retained for a minimum of 30 years before they were reviewed for preservation at The Public Record Office (as The National Archives was known until 2003). Any material deemed ‘sensitive’ could be withheld for longer periods and, in the case of some intelligence records, this could be 50 years or more.

But from 1994 John Major’s government introduced a limited right to access to records younger than 30 years. This legislation was known as ‘The Code of Practice for Access to Government Information’ and was a precursor to the full Freedom of Information Act promised by the Labour party under Tony Blair. From 1999 I began using the Code to frame specific requests for access to files on UFO sightings that had become causes célèbres. My first success came early in 2001 when, in response to a request under the Code, the MoD agreed to send me the papers they held on the Rendlesham Forest UFO incident. The Rendlesham sightings were known to many as the British

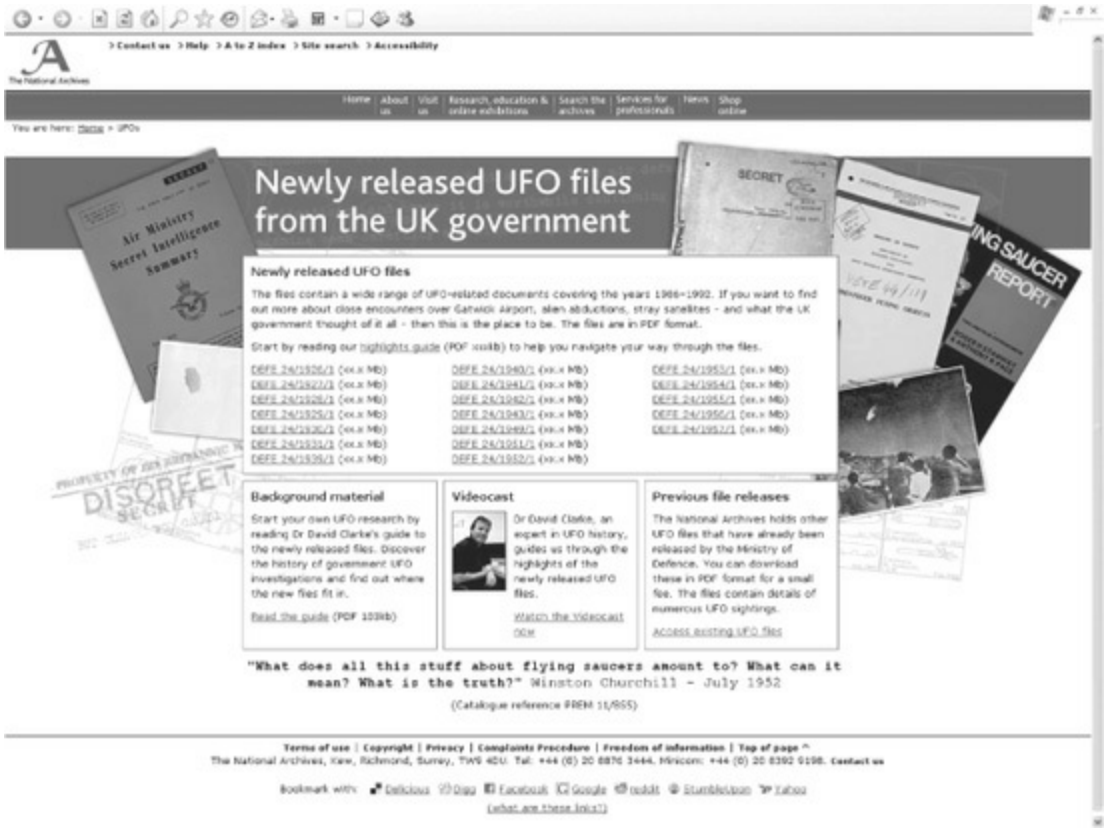
equivalent of the famous Roswell incident (see Chapter 5).

This was merely the opening salvo in what would become almost a full-time crusade for the disclosure of all British government papers on UFOs. By the time the Freedom of Information Act arrived in 2005, UFOs were among the three most popular subjects for requests received by the MoD. Behind the scenes, working with a small group of motivated colleagues, my strategy of using carefully targeted FOI requests to persuade the MoD and other government departments to reveal what they knew was gaining momentum. I soon became known throughout Whitehall as the MoD's most 'persistent correspondent' on UFOs, and papers from my FOI campaign have been preserved for posterity in the files themselves.[3]

By 2005 more than 200 UFO files had already been opened to the public at The National Archives, but a similar number remained locked away in the MoD Main Building at Whitehall. Under normal circumstances the public would have had to wait at least 30 years before they were allowed to see them. Growing public demands for their full disclosure ultimately led the Ministry to transfer the remaining UFO files to The National Archives. How and why that decision was made is the real story at the heart of this book.

The release of 'Britain's X-files' was closely followed by the international media and received extensive coverage from national and regional newspapers, radio and TV news. During the days that followed the opening of the first tranche in May 2008, The National Archives' UFO webpage – set up to provide direct public access to the files – received more than 1.7 million visitors. This was more than double the number recorded for earlier online releases of documents, such as the Domesday Survey in 2006. Internet searches on UFOs tripled overnight across the globe and it was even reported that the bookmakers William Hill had lowered the odds of finding extraterrestrial life from 100/1 to 80/1.

Since the first media event, The National Archives UFO website has been visited more than 3 million times. Over 5.7 million pages have been viewed and more than 3.8 million documents have been downloaded. Visitors come from 160 different countries, with most from the United States (approximately 42 per cent) followed by the UK (35 per cent) and even South Korea (2 per cent) and China (1 per cent).


Newly released UFO files from the UK government
Newly released UFO files
Background material
Videocast
Previous file releases
"What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth?" Winston Churchill - July 1952

The National Archives UFO page, launched in 2008 following the transfer of MoD files to Kew. www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufos.

As the rolling disclosure programme continued, it seemed the public could not read enough about the files. Interest reached a peak in the summer of 2010 when a further 5,000 pages of information were released, including a story concerning British Prime Minister Winston Churchill's involvement in a wartime UFO sighting (see Chapter 1). This release alone generated no less than 196 separate news items in the national and international media and reached an estimated print/online readership of 25 million people.

Currently, The National Archives hold a complete collection of official UFO documents up to the present day. This consists of approximately 400 files dating from 1912 to 2009. The more recent are arranged thematically, with chronological sequences of UFO sighting report files beginning in 1962. One series follows the UFO desk's protracted correspondence with members of the public, MPs and peers of the realm. Others deal with the evolution of British government policy on UFOs, Parliamentary questions, statistical analysis and media issues.

Of course the official paper trail is just one aspect of the UFO files story. Wherever possible I have followed up information I found in the files to track down and talk to those people who reported their experiences to the MoD and to those who were responsible for official investigations. What they had to say often casts new light on the nature of the MoD's interest in UFOs and the twists and turns of official policy.

Those files that survive contain approximately 100,000 pages and this is a just a fraction of the total number that once existed. It is not possible, in a book of this size, to provide a comprehensive guide to the entire collection. The UFO Files is based upon a selection of the more fascinating highlights from the files and charts how the government, the scientific establishment and media have reacted to experiences that defy attempts to explain them.

Chapter 1
Strange Lights in the Skies

Throughout recorded history humans have observed objects in the heavens that they have been unable to identify. Until relatively recently celestial phenomena such as comets, the aurora and eclipses of the sun and moon were regarded with superstitious awe and terror. Today most people have a basic understanding of an eclipse and the origins of comets and meteors, but there remain many less readily recognisable things in the sky. Together such phenomena fall into the category of Unidentified Flying Objects, or UFOs, a term that covers anything in the heavens which cannot be easily identified but carries the heavy implication of an extraterrestrial origin. But if you know where to look, history is full of accounts that seem spookily similar to modern UFO sightings, although contemporary explanations were often very different.

In ancient times signs and portents in the sky were attributed to the activities of the gods, but the Romans entertained the possibility of voyages to the moon and other worlds. Some modern authors point to descriptions of 'fiery chariots' and 'pillars of cloud and fire' from the Old Testament as evidence of UFO activity in ancient times. In Chariots of the Gods?, Erich von Daniken claimed that myths and legends concerning gods and angels were really descriptions of technologically advanced aliens who visited our world in the distant past. His book was first published in 1968, the same year Stanley Kubrik's movie 2001: A Space Odyssey predicted the discovery of evidence of extraterrestrial life and suggested that intervention by alien intelligences may have occurred at an earlier stage of human evolution. In 1969 science fiction became science fact when Apollo astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first men to walk on the moon.

But the idea that explorers from other worlds visited Earth in the past and occasionally returned to keep a watchful eye on the human race was nothing new. Half a century before the moon landings, the American collector of curiosities, Charles Fort (1874–1932), speculated the human race was 'property'. In his Book of the Damned, published in 1919, he wrote that: '… once upon a time, this earth was No-man's Land, that other worlds explored

and colonised here, and fought among themselves for possession, but that now it's owned by something… all others warned off.' Fort's evidence was culled from accounts of unusual phenomena in the sky that he found in the archives of scientific journals and newspapers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He referred to this as 'damned data' because of the way the establishment attempted to explain away phenomena that could not be accounted for within the confines of existing scientific knowledge.

During the nineteenth century sightings of strange lights in the sky were occasionally recorded in the logbooks and journals of mariners and explorers. Sometimes these were reported officially to the British government. Charles Fort highlighted a sighting recorded in February 1893 by Captain Charles Norcock, commander of the corvette HMS Caroline, as evidence that Earth had been visited 'by explorers from other worlds'. On a wintry evening, the ship was steaming from Shanghai towards the Sea of Japan when the watch officer called the captain to the deck and pointed towards the 6,000 ft height of Mount Auckland. Above the horizon, but in front of the mountain, appeared a formation of strange lights, 'resembling Chinese lanterns festooned between the masts of a lofty vessel'. The lights first appeared as one mass, then spread out in irregular lines as they moved northwards. More curious lights were seen the following night from a different location. Capt. Norcock, using a telescope, described them as oval, red-coloured 'globes of fire' that hovered above the horizon in a massed group 'with an outlying light away to the right'. Occasionally this would disappear and 'the others would take the form of a crescent or diamond, or hang festoon-fashion in a curved line'. On arrival in the Japanese port of Kobe, the captain noticed a newspaper report which said 'the unknown light of Japan' had been seen by local fishermen 'as was customary at this season when the weather is very cold, stormy and clear'. Norcock learned from the captain of another warship, HMS Leander, that his officers had also seen lights they thought were from a ship on fire in the same locality. They altered their course to assist but found the lights rose into the sky as they approached.[1]

Three decades earlier the British government set up the very first official inquiry into unexplained aerial phenomena. In 1865 the Board of Trade was asked to investigate the source of 'mysterious lights' that lured many ships to destruction on the coast of northeast England. In December of that year the losses became so great that a group of sea pilots and fishermen petitioned their MP for an inquiry. A commission led by Rear Admiral Sir Richard Collinson

(1811–1883) arrived in Sunderland and took statements from coastguards, mariners and residents who had witnessed the lights. In testimony preserved at The National Archives, experienced crewmen described how they had been lured towards the shore by a revolving light or lights which they mistook for the lighthouse at the mouth of the Tyne. They did not realise they were mistaken until the ships struck treacherous rocks. Coastguards and fishermen told the inquiry similar lights had been seen over the coast near Souter Point for a period of 30 years, but never as frequently as during the winter of 1865–66. The commission was unable to find any evidence that 'false lights' had been deliberately lit by anyone who could profit from the wrecks. After the loss of 20 further vessels in 1869, Trinity House built a new lighthouse on Souter Point to guide ships to safety. The mysterious lights were never seen again.[2]

Although the phenomena seen over the Durham coastline and the Sea of Japan were just 'lights', there are also nineteenth century examples of circular and torpedo-shaped objects seen in the sky. For example, on 22 March 1870 the crew of the barque Lady of the Lake observed what they described as a 'remarkable cloud' rising into the sky during a cruise in the North Atlantic Ocean. The 'cloud' was circular, grey in colour and had a complex internal structure divided into four sections, the central dividing shaft beginning at the centre of the circle and extending far outwards. The mysterious 'cloud' was visible for half an hour and appeared to rise from the southern horizon. It disappeared in the northeast. In an entry taken from the ship's log, Captain Frederick Banner noted the strange object appeared much lower than the other clouds and added: 'It came up obliquely against the wind, and finally settled down right in the wind's eye.'[3]

Apart from Charles Fort, few people in the ninenteenth century were prepared to speculate that Earth received regular visits from alien explorers. But journeys through the sky – and ultimately to other worlds – were now part of science fiction literature. Jules Verne's 1865 book Round the Moon and its sequel From Earth to the Moon introduced the idea of travel by spaceship to a mass readership. Meanwhile, stories describing exotic aliens who lived on the moon and Mars were published by mass circulation newspapers. For instance, Benjamin Day caused a sensation in 1835 when his newspaper, the New York Sun, published a series on 'Great Astronomical Discoveries' that described plants and animals living on the lunar surface and humanoid creatures who flew with bat-like wings. Later in the century, Percival Lowell scrutinised the planet Mars from an observatory in Arizona and became convinced the

Martian ‘canals’ were evidence the red planet was home to an advanced civilisation.

If intelligent aliens existed on Mars or elsewhere in the solar system, the next logical question was: were they friendly or hostile? When H. G. Wells discussed this question with his brother Frank, the two men wondered how humans would cope when confronted by a more advanced alien race. Frank drew parallels with the trauma experienced by the native people of Tasmania when they were colonised by Europeans. This remark gave Wells the inspiration for what is undoubtedly one of the finest science fiction novels ever written, The War of the Worlds.

The year before Wells’s book was published, there was a flood of sightings in North America of a ‘mysterious airship’ similar to those imagined in the books of Jules Verne. Many believed the airship was the product of an American secret inventor who was testing his flying machine in secrecy. Most of the sightings were of lights in the night sky but the ‘airship’ was also seen in daylight and was described as cigar-shaped, silver in colour and equipped with a variety of wings, sails and propellers. The airship wave began in California in November 1896 and the sightings spread eastwards. By the spring of 1897 hundreds of American citizens including police officers, judges and businessmen were quoted by newspapers as having observed the ‘mysterious airship’. These sightings, however, took place more than five years before the Wright brothers’ flimsy aeroplane took to the air at Kitty Hawk. Intriguingly, they also included many themes that would later turn up in the age of the modern UFO, including landings in remote areas, crashes that left behind strange pieces of metal inscribed with hieroglyphs and even encounters with airship crews. For example, one man in California claimed he had encountered a landed craft and its Martian crew, who tried to kidnap him and his companion.

AIRSHIPS AND SCARESHIPS

The optimism and wonder that sustained the North American craze for seeing advanced flying machines similar to those imagined by Jules Verne was replaced in Europe by fear of invasion and attack from the air. In 1908 H. G. Wells’s novel The War in the Air predicted a future war in which German airships and aircraft would be used to bomb civilians in New York and other cities. In Britain Wells’s fiction appeared to take a step nearer to fact in the

spring of 1909, when stories began to reach London of weird lights and cigar-shaped objects seen lurking in the heavens at night. Startling accounts soon appeared in the press. Among these was one volunteered by farmhand Fred Harrison from King's Lynn, Norfolk, and published in the Daily Express on 14 May 1909. Harrison said: 'I heard a whirring noise overhead, and when I looked up I saw that the fields round were lit up by a bright light. The light came from a long, dark object which was travelling swiftly overhead. It was low down – only a little way above the trees – so I could see it plainly… The searchlight lit up the road, the farm buildings, the trees and everything it touched, so that it was like day.'

Some reports came from respectable sources. One of the first was made by a serving officer of the Peterborough police force who was pounding the beat in the early hours of 23 March 1909. According to a story published in the Daily Mail two days later, PC Kettle heard 'the steady buzz of a high-powered engine' and on looking up saw a powerful light high up in the dawn sky and 'a dark body, oblong and narrow in shape, outlined against the stars'.

It is not hard to imagine these accounts making headlines as the latest UFO or flying saucer sightings. In 1909 they were interpreted not as evidence of alien craft that had crossed vast interplanetary distances, but of enemy airships that had travelled to Britain across the North Sea. The monstrous German Zeppelin was less than a decade old but had in its various incarnations come to symbolise German technical superiority in the air. With rivalry between the two countries growing, these sightings were taken by some as incontrovertible evidence that Germany was spying on Britain from the air.

As with the late nineteenth century American sightings there were even allegations of 'contact', as found in the tale of the Cardiff man who encountered what he thought to be a landed airship on a remote hillside in South Wales. Mr Lethbridge, a Punch-and-Judy showman, was riding across Caerphilly Mountain late at night in May 1909 when he turned a bend and saw 'a long-tube-shaped affair lying on the roadside'. Two men dressed in heavy fur-coats and caps were busy at work on their flying machine. As he approached they jumped up and 'jabbered furiously to each other' in a language he didn't understand. Before he could say anything, the men (whom he assumed were German spies) jumped into a cabin beneath the airship, which then 'rose into the air in a zig-zag fashion'. It disappeared towards Cardiff, showing two brilliant lights as it rose into the sky.[4]

AN EARLY SILLY SEASON.

The Sea-Serpent. "WELL, IF THIS SORT OF THING KEEPS ON, IT'LL MEAN A DU'LL AUGUST FOR ME."

A Punch cartoon by Bernard Partridge published at the height of the ‘phantom airship’ scare in 1909

As headlines questioned ‘Whose is the airship?’, some members of the press used these alarming stories to pressurise the British government to increase spending on aircraft. Others asked ‘does it really exist or is it a figment of our imagination?’. It was, as many recognised at the time, highly unlikely that any extant German airships would have been capable of such a journey. After all, it was only in July 1909 that French aeronaut Louis Blériot completed his famous aeroplane crossing of the English Channel, a feat that led the newspaper magnate Lord Northcliffe to proclaim ‘England is no longer an island’.

Sceptical journalists dubbed the nocturnal visitors ‘scareships’ and asked why they seemed to vanish at dawn. At 1,000 miles each way, the round trip from the Zeppelin hangars at Friedrichshafen in Germany to the east coast of Britain would also have been impossible to complete under cover of darkness and would have taken the giant airship over parts of Belgium and France in daylight, where it would have been seen by thousands of people.

THE SHEERNESS INCIDENT

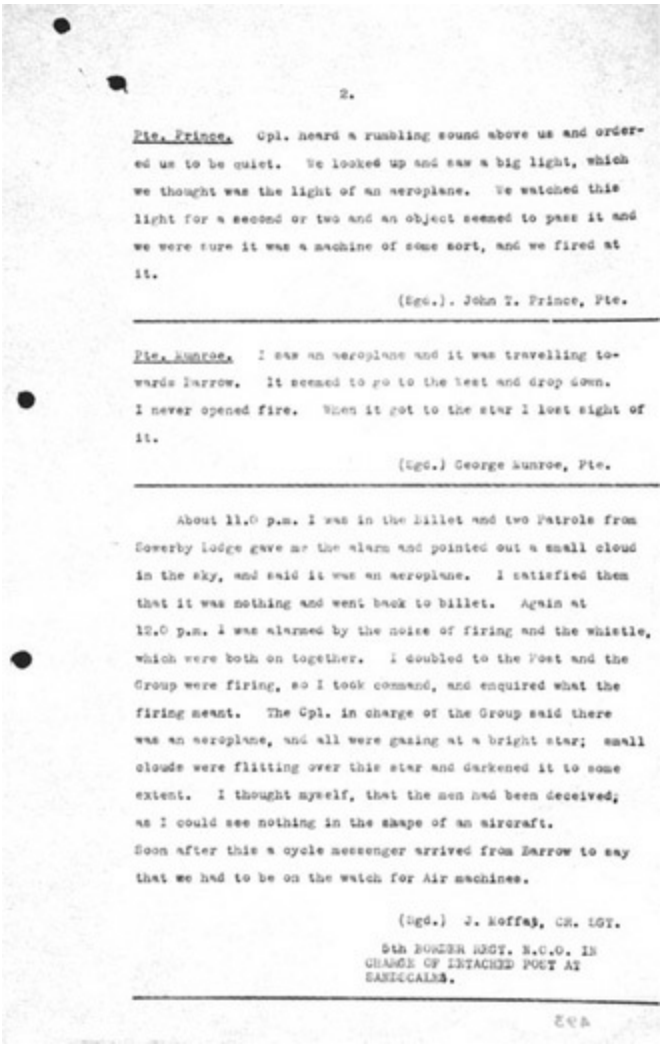
Although the 1909 airship scare came to an end after a couple of months, more sightings would follow. In 1912 Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, presided over what could be called the first government inquiry into a UFO sighting over a sensitive military base. The future Prime Minister’s interest in this subject would resurface again when UFOs made headlines during the 1950s (see p. 43).

Winston Churchill in 1910. Two years later, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he ordered the first British government inquiry into a UFO sighting over Sheerness naval base in Essex. This UFO was suspected to be the German Zeppelin, the L-1. (COPY 1/543)

On 13 October 1912 a new naval Zeppelin, the L-1, set out on a 30-hour endurance flight from its base at Friedrichshafen in Germany. The 900-mile flight took the airship out over the North Sea; it then turned towards Berlin, where it landed at 3.45 pm on the following day. Just after sunset that afternoon, something was seen and heard flying above the port of Sheerness in Kent. The dockyards here were an important part of Britain's defences and home to a Royal Navy torpedo school and naval flying station at nearby Eastchurch.

As the days passed, news of the Zeppelin flight over the North Sea reached the British government and the incident assumed a more sinister aspect for officials. On 25 October the director of the Admiralty Air Department, Murray F. Sueter, asked the Captain of the Royal Navy torpedo school to 'make private enquiries' to discover whether a Zeppelin really had visited Sheerness. Questioned in the House of Commons on 21 November, Churchill wrote: 'I caused enquiries to be made and have ascertained that an unknown aircraft was heard over Sheerness about 7 pm… Flares were lighted at Eastchurch, but the aircraft did not make a landing.' Questioned further as to whether he knew 'where our own airships were on that night', Churchill replied: 'I know it was not one of our airships.'[5]

The outcry that followed publication of this story led Count Zeppelin to telegram the editor of the Daily Mail: 'None of my airships approached the English coast on the night of October 14th.' This was also the conclusion reached by airship historians. The Eastchurch sighting was followed by many others. During February 1913, for example, hundreds of people on England's East Coast saw what they believed was the headlight of a 'phantom Zeppelin' cruising through the clear night sky. On the night of 25 February there were 37 separate sightings, including one by coastguards at Hornsea who reported their observations to the British Admiralty. Sceptics pointed out the scare coincided with a period when the planet Venus was prominent in the night sky after sunset and no evidence has been found that any of the German airship fleet actually visited the English coast during the winter of 1912–13. We are therefore left to wonder what was seen and heard above the torpedo school at Eastchurch and elsewhere as Britain found itself gripped by 'airship mania'. Were people seeing bright celestial objects or simply imagining things?



2.

Pte. Prince. Cpl. heard a rumbling sound above us and ordered us to be quiet. We looked up and saw a big light, which we thought was the light of an aeroplane. We watched this light for a second or two and an object seemed to pass it and we were sure it was a machine of some sort, and we fired at it.

(Sgd.). John T. Prince, Pte.

Pte. Munroe. I saw an aeroplane and it was travelling towards Barrow. It seemed to go to the West and drop down. I never opened fire. When it got to the star I lost sight of it.

(Sgd.) George Munroe, Pte.

About 11.0 p.m. I was in the Billet and two Patrols from Sowerby Lodge gave me the alarm and pointed out a small cloud in the sky, and said it was an aeroplane. I satisfied them that it was nothing and went back to billet. Again at 12.0 p.m. I was alarmed by the noise of firing and the whistle, which were both on together. I doubled to the Post and the Group were firing, so I took command, and enquired what the firing meant. The Cpl. in charge of the Group said there was an aeroplane, and all were gazing at a bright star; small clouds were flitting over this star and darkened it to some extent. I thought myself, that the men had been deceived, as I could see nothing in the shape of an aircraft. Soon after this a cycle messenger arrived from Barrow to say that we had to be on the watch for Air machines.

(Sgd.) J. Moffat, CH. SGT.

5th BORDER REGT. N.C.O. IN CHARGE OF DETACHED POST AT BASSENTHWAITE.

Alarmed by reports of an airship, soldiers opened fire on the night sky on 10 August 1914. The first real Zeppelin air-raid on Britain took place five months later, in January 1915. AIR 1/561/16/15/62

DANGEROUS RUMOURS

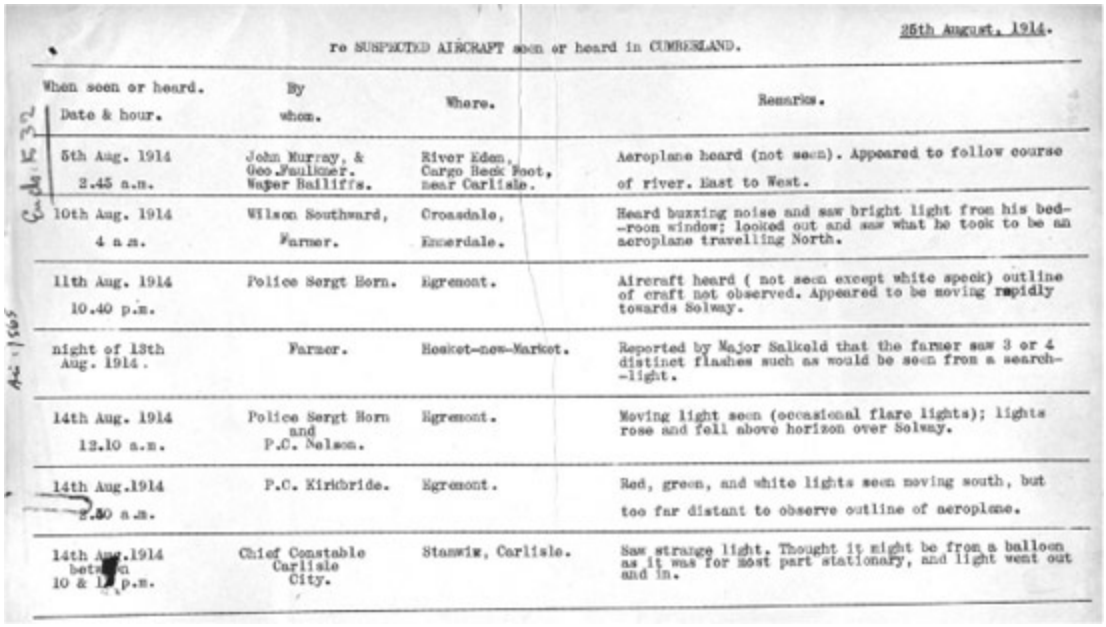
In some cases it certainly seems that people might have been imagining things. One dramatic and slightly comic example, which can be found among the old Air Historical Branch files at The National Archives, happened near the Vickers shipyard at Barrow-in-Furness just days after the outbreak of the First World War. Although the first real German air raid against England by Zeppelins did not occur until January 1915, the War Office was inundated with reports before then; with widespread fear of imminent attack from the air, every light in the sky was transformed into an enemy airship.

The Vickers shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, like Sheerness, was of great military importance and was guarded by the only anti-aircraft gun on the west coast. Sentries were posted around the dockyard with orders to open fire on anyone who did not answer their challenge. Late on the night of 10–11 August, Major Becke, Commander of the Barrow Defences, stated that two, or possibly three, airships had been seen during the night flying over the Vickers yards and had been fired upon by the anti-aircraft gun without effect.

In a detailed description of events, Lieutenant W. Adair of the 5th Border Regiment based at nearby Sowerby Lodge tells how his men had seen two cigar-shaped craft travelling at great height in a northerly direction, their shapes lit up by the glare from the ironworks. At midnight, sentries at Sandscale spotted another light and opened fire with their machine guns. Alongside the excitable statements from those who saw something or fired into the night sky was one from the men's commanding officer who, having heard shots found them: '… gazing at a bright star; small clouds were flitting over this star and darkened it to some extent. I thought myself that the men had been deceived, as I could see nothing in the shape of an aircraft.'[6]

Elsewhere in the same Air Historical Branch file is a more troublesome account from the end of 1914, which was recorded by the crew of a Hull trawler – the SS Ape –the night before the German High Seas fleet bombarded the east coast ports of Scarborough and Whitby. In a statement to an intelligence officer, the ship's master described how his ship was steaming towards Yarmouth at 4.10 pm on 15 December when the crew sighted 'a black object astern which gradually drew nearer'. They saw the airship turn and head towards the Lincolnshire coast, where it vanished in the haze and fog.

Alone among the many reports of airships from the first year of the war this was recorded in the official history as ‘proved to be founded on fact’. However, we now know that a German airship could not have been responsible for this sighting. Airship war diaries examined by historian Douglas Robinson show that weather conditions were so atrocious on 15 December 1914 that none of the German naval airships were able to leave their sheds on the Continent.[7] And as with earlier sightings, any German airship making its way to these shores would surely have been seen somewhere by someone as it crossed mainland Europe.



25th August, 1914.

re SUSPECTED AIRCRAFT seen or heard in CUMBERLAND.

When seen or heard. Date & hour.	By whom.	Where.	Remarks.
5th Aug. 1914 2.45 a.m.	John Murray, & Geo.Faulkner. Water Bailiffs.	River Eden, Cargo Beck Foot, near Carlisle.	Aeroplane heard (not seen). Appeared to follow course of river. East to West.
10th Aug. 1914 4 a.m.	Wilson Southward, Farmer.	Crosadale, Ennerdale.	Heard buzzing noise and saw bright light from his bed-room window; looked out and saw what he took to be an aeroplane travelling North.
11th Aug. 1914 10.40 p.m.	Police Sergt Horn.	Egremont.	Aircraft heard (not seen except white speck) outline of craft not observed. Appeared to be moving rapidly towards Solway.
night of 13th Aug. 1914.	Farmer.	Hesket-new-Market.	Reported by Major Salkeld that the farmer saw 3 or 4 distinct flashes such as would be seen from a search-light.
14th Aug. 1914 12.10 a.m.	Police Sergt Horn and P.C. Nelson.	Egremont.	Moving light seen (occasional flare lights); lights rose and fell above horizon over Solway.
14th Aug.1914 2.30 a.m.	P.C. Kirkbride.	Egremont.	Red, green, and white lights seen moving south, but too far distant to observe outline of aeroplane.
14th Aug.1914 between 10 & 11 p.m.	Chief Constable Carlisle City.	Stanwix, Carlisle.	Saw strange light. Thought it might be from a balloon as it was for most part stationary, and light went out and in.

Extract from a military intelligence file listing reports of ‘suspected aircraft’ reported to the Chief Constable of Cumberland in August 1914, on the outbreak of the First World War. AIR 1/565/16/15/18.

Whatever visited England in darkness during the first months of the war, it could not have been a Zeppelin. So what was being seen? During the 1909 wave it emerged that jokers had successfully fooled at least some witnesses with lighted box-kites and fire-balloons. Indeed, as recently as 2009, fleets of Chinese lanterns – lit by tiny candles – have tricked people into thinking they were seeing UFOs. Could the same be said in 1912 and 1914? Were these strange sightings just balloons and bright stars transformed by fear and anxiety into something more threatening? Whether or not this was the explanation, these early sightings are undoubtedly direct precursors of the UFO scares that would follow in the modern era.

ENCOUNTERS OVER LONDON

The most important 'phantom airship' sighting recorded in the official history of German air raids stands apart from others made at this time and also counts as the first encounter with a UFO reported by a British military pilot. On the night of 31 January 1916, the crews of nine German Navy Zeppelins left their sheds on the Continent with orders to attack Liverpool, with London as a secondary target. In the event, the plan was thrown into chaos by poor weather conditions of freezing rain, snow and thick ground mist. This hid much of the countryside from the air and made accurate navigation impossible. In the confusion that followed, several towns in the Midlands were bombed leaving 71 people dead and 113 injured.

During the raid, the War Office was able to plot the course of all nine raiding airships. From the maps they produced it appears that none of the raiders reached London or the Southeast of England, but at least one of the raiders initially turned south after crossing the East Anglian coastline at 7.00 pm. The War Office calculated that if that course were held, the Zeppelin would be over London within one hour and aircraft defending the capital were ordered to intercept them.

Shortly before 8.30 pm two Royal Flying Corps pilots flying B.E.2c biplanes reported pursuing moving lights at 10,000 ft above Central London. Both lost their targets in cloud, and it seems possible they had actually spotted lights on each other's planes. But another sighting by a Royal Navy pilot is much more difficult to explain.

At 8.45 pm Flight Sub-Lieutenant Eric Morgan took off from the Royal

Naval Air Service station at Rochford in Essex and began to patrol at 6,400 ft when his engine started misfiring. At this point he saw a little above his own altitude and slightly ahead to his right, about 100 ft away from his plane, ‘a row of what appeared to be lighted windows which looked something like a railway carriage with the blinds drawn’. Assuming he had come face to face with a Zeppelin preparing an attack upon Central London, Morgan drew his Webley & Scott pistol and fired. Immediately, ‘the lights alongside rose rapidly’ and disappeared into the inky blackness, so rapidly in fact that Morgan believed his own aircraft had gone into a dive. He battled to bring his plane under control and was forced to make an emergency landing on the Thameshaven Marshes.

An account of Morgan’s sighting, described as ‘an encounter with a phantom airship’, appears in Captain Joseph Morris’s official history The German Air Raids on Great Britain 1914–18, published in 1925 and based upon then classified records. Morris refers directly to the airman’s report filed with the Admiralty, but this report is not mentioned in the official account of the 31 January 1916 raid published by the War Office which charts the flight paths of the Zeppelins and the attempts by British fighters to intercept them. As a result, historians have been left with the impression that the authorities gave no credence to it.

There was in fact a story from a fourth pilot, Flight Sub-Lieutenant H. McClelland, who reported seeing what he described as ‘a Zeppelin’ caught briefly in the glare of searchlights above London at 9.00 pm, 15 minutes after Morgan’s encounter. It disappeared as he closed the distance. His report was forwarded to the Admiralty where the Third Sea Lord, Rear-Admiral F.C.T. Tudor, dismissed it with the comment: ‘night flying must be difficult and dangerous, and require considerable nerve and pluck, but this airman seems to have been gifted with a more than usually vivid imagination.’[8]

PHANTOM AIRSHIP VISITS SCARBORO'.

IS THE "WIRELESS" STATION THE OBJECTIVE?

SEARCHLIGHT SPYING OVER THE RACECOURSE.

MYSTERIOUS LIGHTS IN THE SKY.

TWO VISITS OF AERIAL INVESTIGATORS.

Like many others, this article from the Scarborough Daily Post, published 20 February 1913, explained the airship sightings by suggesting Britain was under 'systematic surveillance from the skies by the aerial spies of a foreign Power.'

THE LIGHT ON THE MOORS

Phantom Zeppelins were not the only phenomena that authorities struggled to explain during the First World War. Given the widespread belief that German spies were active in Britain in large numbers, they found themselves carrying out a number of investigations into things that might have been ignored during peacetime. Most obvious of these are the stories of moving lights that began to reach the War Office and which, it was feared, could reveal attempts to communicate with German ships or aircraft from the ground via sophisticated flares.

During the period 1915–16, for example, the Royal Navy base at Devonport began to receive accounts of mysterious lights seen on Dartmoor. Among the Admiralty records at The National Archives is a statement signed by Lieutenant Montague Elliott, Commander-in-Chief, Royal Naval Reserve, Devonport, which mentions 'countless reports' describing a ball of light that 'is seen to rise perpendicularly from the ground to a height of anything from 30 to 60 feet'.[9] These sightings caused great concern and attempts were made by intelligence officers to capture this 'floating light' by staking out parts of bleak Dartmoor late at night.

An extraordinary account of one such operation is contained in the same file. Lieutenant-Colonel W.P. Drury was the garrison intelligence officer at Devonport and in late December 1915 he questioned a number of civilians living in the Ashburton area who had seen mysterious lights moving over Dartmoor in the early hours. One of these was a Mrs Cave-Penny who lived in an isolated farm that commanded an excellent view of the moors around Hexworthy Mine. She and her daughter reported seeing on several occasions 'a bright white light rise from a point a few hundred yards to the East of the mine', which swung across the valley and disappeared. 'The light sometimes rose above the skyline, at others it showed against the loom of Down Ridge on which the mine is situated', Drury's report stated. 'On each occasion it rose from the same spot and followed the same course.'

Alerted to this regular occurrence Drury obtained permission to stake out three locations where the lights had been sighted. After several night-time visits he saw the phenomenon himself. At 9.30 pm on 4 September 1915 Drury and another intelligence officer began watching Dartmoor from a hiding place

opposite the main Totnes–Newton Abbot road. His report describes how suddenly: '… we observed a bright white light, considerably larger in appearance than a planet, steadily ascend from the meadow to an approximate height of 50 or 60 feet. It then swung for a hundred yards or so to the left, and suddenly vanished. Its course was clearly visible against the dark background of wood and hill, though, the night being dark it was not easy to determine whether it was a little above or beneath the skyline. We were within a mile of the light and both saw its ascension and transit distinctly.'

Unfortunately for their operation, the River Dart lay between the two men and the mysterious light and there was no bridge or ford where they could cross to reach the meadow from which it appeared to rise. Unable to solve the mystery, Drury completed his report on a note of disappointment: '… I have watched Down Ridge, Dartington Manor, and Barton Pines by night on several occasions before and since September 4th, but that date is the only time I personally have seen this 'floating light' which has so often been reported by other and reliable witnesses… '[10]

Three months later GHQ Home Forces issued a 16-page confidential report on the outcome of their investigations into hundreds of similar reports of lights in the sky that had been widely attributed to German spies. This concluded there was 'no evidence on which to base a suspicion that this class of enemy activity ever existed' and said around 89 per cent of the reports had been explained. In this report one group of sightings is categorised as 'moving lights in the air' and states: 'These lights are often difficult to explain satisfactorily. The planets and very bright stars have frequently given rise to these reports… [and] in one case there are grounds for believing that these lights have been based on the hitherto improperly observed phenomena of marsh gas or 'ignis fatuus'.[11]

This conclusion is less than convincing as it invokes one unexplained phenomena to explain another. Ignis fatuus ('foolish fire') is also known, in English folklore, as the 'Will-o'-the-Wisp' or 'Jack-o'-Lantern'. It is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a phosphorescent light seen hovering or flitting over marshy ground'. In the past the elusive movements of these lights led observers to believe they were controlled by a mischievous spirit that led travellers astray in the dark. Although formerly a common night-time phenomenon in rural parts of the British Isles, sightings have been exceedingly rare in modern times. From at least the eighteenth century, chemists believed

that methane produced by rotting organic matter could spontaneously ignite to create incandescent lights that, after dark, might appear to rise into the air. But more recent studies, such as that published in 1980 by chemist Dr Alan Mills from Leicester University, concluded that any bubbles of marsh gas that did ignite would create a dim glow at ground level and would be short-lived.[12] This phenomenon could not explain sightings of brilliant lights that rise into the sky or follow a regular flight path, such as those described by the observers during the First World War. The Dartmoor sightings also resemble the stories of 'false lights' seen over the Durham coastline during the 1860s, which behaved in a similar elusive fashion. Again these reports triggered an official inquiry. Were both describing a similar phenomenon?

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE

The mysterious floating lights seen over Dartmoor during the First World War were never satisfactorily explained, but official interest in reports of this kind largely came to an end after the war. One quite surprising group did, though, continue to collect accounts of unusual lights in the sky: scientists working for the Meteorological Office who were trying to understand ball lightning.

Ball lightning is often described as an incandescent sphere and is usually, but not always, seen in the sky during thunderstorms. Unlike fork or sheet lightning, which lasts for seconds only, those who have experienced ball lightning sometimes claim it is visible for minutes.

It was first recognised as a distinctive phenomenon in 1886, but stories describing lightning balls of considerable size and power can be traced back many centuries. One of the best-known historical accounts comes from Widdecombe-in-the-Moor, on Dartmoor. During a great thunderstorm there on 21 October 1638, a 'great fiery ball' entered the church and split into two. One fireball escaped through a window while the other vanished, leaving behind it a foul odour of sulphur and thick smoke. The building was partly destroyed by the blast; four parishioners were killed and 60 injured.[13]

In 1921 the Meteorological Office, at that time part of the Air Ministry, received a spectacular account of ball lightning seen over St John's Wood, North London, during a severe storm on the evening of 26 June. A lady letter writer said she was watching the extreme weather over the capital from her window, which faced southeast. Without warning, at 2 am, she suddenly saw a

fireball in the sky. Her account read: 'It appeared as an incandescent mass floating in the atmosphere below the clouds. It was pear-shaped, the greatest width being equivalent to three moons, the height to four or five.'[14] She was unable to say how far away the fireball was, but her account suggests it must have been of enormous size. This light in the sky was visible for at least two minutes, because she had time to walk to a friend's room and rouse her before it vanished.

Her account fascinated meteorologists at the Air Ministry and they decided to launch an inquiry. Within days a press release was sent out to the national newspapers appealing to anyone who had seen ball lightning 'and related phenomena' to contact the Meteorological Office. The results of this inquiry survive in an extraordinary file at The National Archives containing over 100 letters and questionnaires completed by members of the public who responded to the appeal. One of those who filled in a questionnaire was Mrs Phillis Coe from Enfield, Middlesex, who appeared to have seen the same fireball. She wrote: '… I observed in an easterly direction a long, incandescent mass apparently floating just beneath the clouds and to all appearances stationary. This mass seemed to dilate and contract as it floated during the 10 or 15 minutes I watched it. The sight was so extraordinary that I awoke my husband and drew his attention to it, but we were both unable to account for the phenomenon and although we questioned several people afterwards we could not trace anyone who had seen it.'[15]

While some correspondents described seeing the fireball over London on 26 June, the Meteorological Office also received descriptions from people who had seen similar things at different times. And this is where the file becomes particularly intriguing. Annie Baker, for example, of East Southsea, Portsmouth, had read of the 'strange ball of fire' seen over London and wrote to tell what she had seen during another thunderstorm in the last week of July 1921. In her letter she described how: '… in the early hours… about 2 o'clock [I saw] a strange-looking bladder-like monster the shape of an airship only much wider. It quite startled me. I called to my husband to look at it, but knowing I am a bit nervous about thunderstorms, he did not get up. Well, it flickered very much, it was certainly [on] fire inside it, and looked as if it were going to burst. It was quite stationary for a few minutes, but thank goodness it passed away and disappeared quickly… '[16]

More dramatically, a woman from Waterford in Ireland wrote to say that

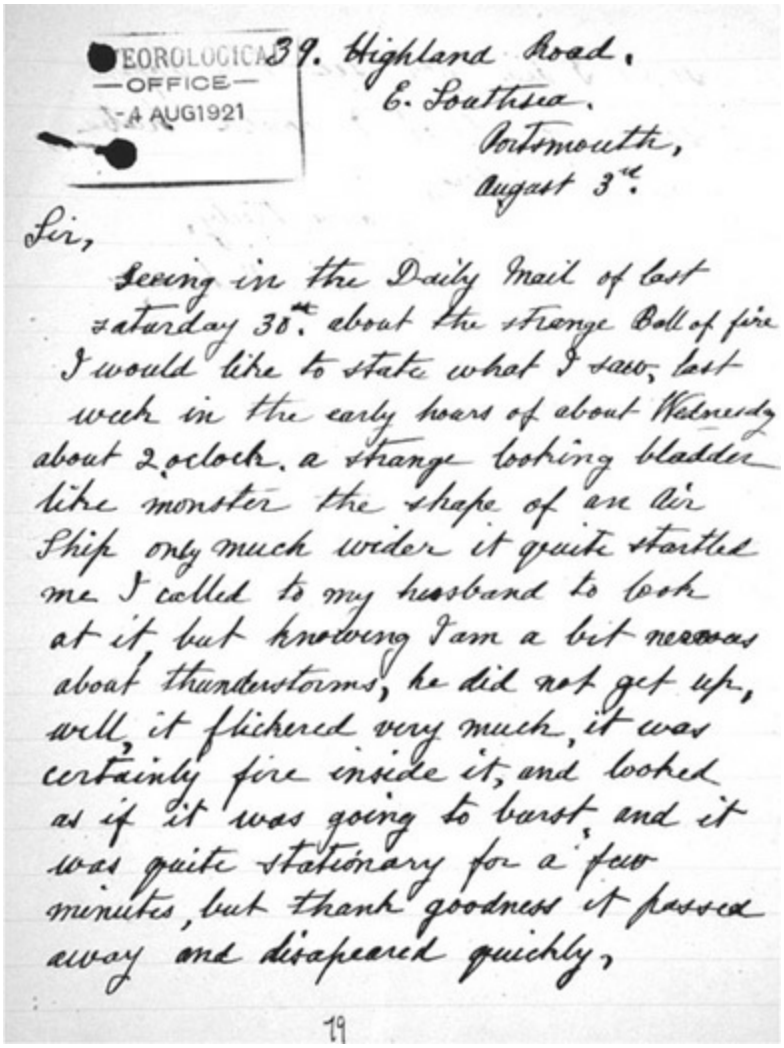
while she had not seen the fireball in St John's Wood, she thought she might have seen one back in 1912. At the time she had been out on a night-time winters walk when 'without any warning, a huge ball of light appeared through the clouds.' According to her letter it remained stationary for about a minute before going up into the clouds again. About five minutes afterwards she heard a loud explosion out at sea. Echoing the contents of letters that would later be sent to the Ministry of Defence by many UFO witnesses, she asked: 'This has often puzzled me and I would be glad if you could tell me what it was.'

Of the 115 letters and questionnaires received by the Air Ministry in 1921, just 65 appeared to describe the phenomenon of ball lightning. The remaining accounts included some truly bizarre examples that appeared when no thunderstorms were present. One story in this category was submitted by a man in Scotland who described something that had happened to him as a child in 1898. 'I remember to this day,' he wrote, 'whilst coming home from school I saw a great ball of lightning about the size of a football, only it was flat as a coin and white. It would have put you in mind of a full moon high up in the heavens. But what made me write to tell you about this was that it was so low I could have thrown my cap and hit it. I ran after it and followed it for about 10 yards. Then, travelling very fast, it vanished.'[17]

The results of the inquiry were published by the geophysicist Harold Jeffreys in The Meteorological Magazine during September 1921. In his paper Jeffreys describes how he tried and failed to find a common denominator in the accounts collected by the Meteorological Office, noting '… the definitely unusual objects reported included a lunar halo, a miniature tornado and a very fine will-o'-the-wisp'. As we have seen, 50 of those who responded to the questionnaire had seen lights in the sky at different dates and times, which were possibly not ball lightning at all. Even among those who described seeing what the Meteorological Office did categorise as ball lightning there was little agreement on its size or the length of time that it was visible. Some said the fireball they saw was between 3 in and 1 ft in size. Others described a light high in the clouds that they compared with the disc of the full moon. Jeffreys recognised this meant the diameter of ball lightning could be as small as a few inches, or as large as 60 ft, but few observers were qualified to make such precise judgements.

Similarly diverse and contradictory were the time estimates. Some ranged from less than 10 seconds to between 1 and 5 minutes. Likewise, colours

described by observers ran from bluish-white to deep red, but the great majority were reddish or yellowish. Shapes described were usually spheres, but several described pear-shaped and elongated objects resembling Zeppelins, similar to the reports of ‘phantom airships’ seen during the First World War. Most reported seeing single objects but one described ‘the appearance of three balls simultaneously, coming from a church spire at a point where it had been struck by an ordinary flash’. When it disappeared, ball lightning was usually silent. Sometimes the phenomenon faded gradually, while others burst and vanished suddenly.



39. Highland Road,
E. Southsea.
Portsmouth,
August 3rd.

Sir,

Seeing in the Daily Mail of last Saturday 30th. about the strange Ball of fire I would like to state what I saw, last week in the early hours of about Wednesday about 2 o'clock. a strange looking bladder like monster the shape of an Air Ship only much wider it quite startled me I called to my husband to look at it but knowing I am a bit nervous about thunderstorms, he did not get up, well it flickered very much, it was certainly fire inside it, and looked as if it was going to burst, and it was quite stationary for a few minutes, but thank goodness it passed away and disapeared quickly,

19

A letter sent to the Air Ministry Meteorological Office in 1921 by a woman who saw ‘a strange looking bladder-like monster’ in the sky during a thunderstorm. AIR 2/205

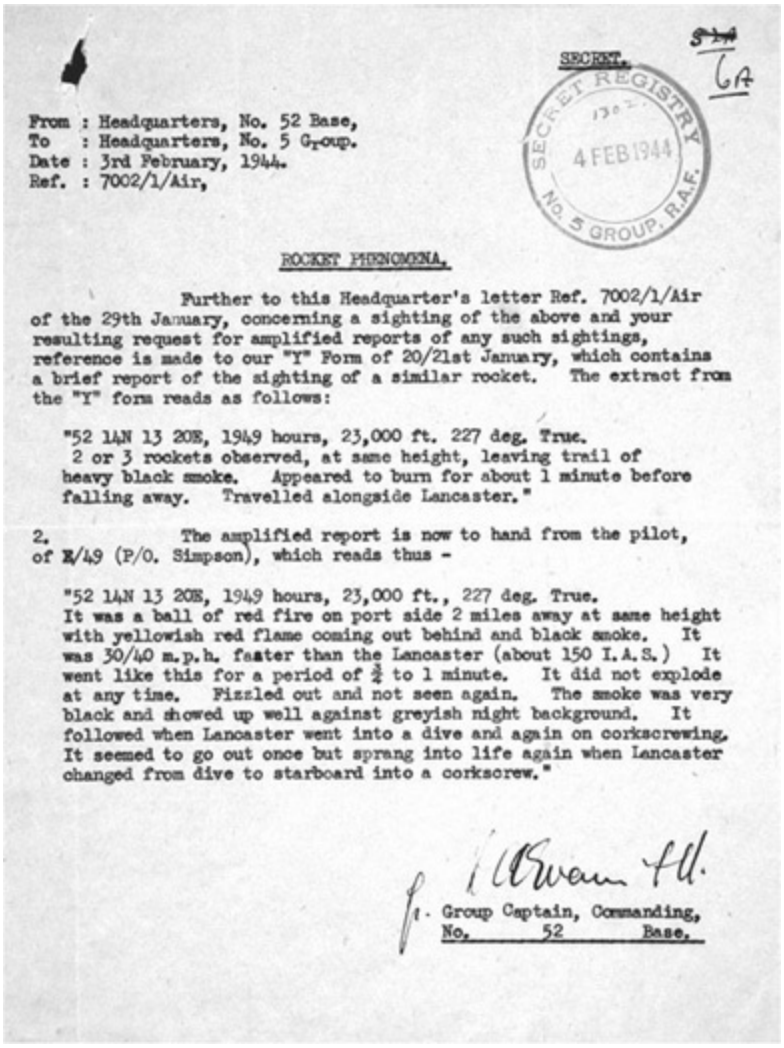
Surveying the evidence, Jeffreys pondered ‘an extraordinarily variable phenomenon’, noting that it seemed impossible that any two correspondents had seen the same thing.[18] Similar conclusions have been reached in official investigations of UFOs in later decades, which suggests that observers are actually reporting many different types of phenomena, all of which could have different origins. During the Second World War more sightings were reported, including many by pilots flying combat missions over Europe and the Pacific. UFOs and flying saucers were still unheard of, but American pilots had another phrase to describe them: foo-fighters.

WHERE THERE’S FOO THERE’S FIRE!

On the evening of 26 April 1944 Flight Lieutenant Arthur Horton taxied his Lancaster bomber onto the runway at RAF Mildenhall, Suffolk, in preparation for a raid on Essen, deep in the steel-making German Ruhr valley. It was, he thought, just another routine, if terrifying, mission for 622 Squadron crews.

The raid went exactly as planned despite the potentially fatal distractions of Luftwaffe night-fighters and the flak that sought them out amongst the searchlight beams. Bombs dropped, Horton’s Lancaster turned for home. Then, shortly after leaving the target, his intercom crackled into life with a warning from the rear-gunner. Some odd lights had appeared out of the darkness and were following the plane. Horton asked the gunner if he was certain. Yes he replied, four orange balls of light were tailing them, two on each side of the aircraft, accelerating in short powerful spurts. According to the worried gunner they were about the size of large footballs and had a fiery glow to them. Another thought he could see small, stubby wings and possibly an exhaust glow from the rear of the objects. Now Horton was getting worried. Some 43 years after the event, Arthur Horton clearly recalled exactly what he did next: ‘… I immediately dropped the aircraft out of the sky. My gunners didn’t know what they were. Should they fire? By this time I was standing the aircraft on its tail and beginning a series of corkscrews and turns with the things following everything I did – but making no move to attack us. By this time we had the throttles “through the gate”, the gunners still asking what they should do. Apart from flying the thing I had to try and answer them. But were they some form of flying contraption that would explode at some specific distance from us, or on contact? Did they want us to fire at them to cause an explosion? Out of the kaleidoscope of thought the only answer was “If they are leaving us alone,

leave them alone".'[19]



SECRET.

SECRET REGISTRY 4 FEB 1944 No. 5 GROUP, R.A.F.

From : Headquarters, No. 52 Base,
To : Headquarters, No. 5 Group.
Date : 3rd February, 1944.
Ref. : 7002/1/Air,

ROCKET PHENOMENA.

Further to this Headquarter's letter Ref. 7002/1/Air of the 29th January, concerning a sighting of the above and your resulting request for amplified reports of any such sightings, reference is made to our "Y" Form of 20/21st January, which contains a brief report of the sighting of a similar rocket. The extract from the "Y" form reads as follows:

"52 14N 13 20E, 1949 hours, 23,000 ft. 227 deg. True.
2 or 3 rockets observed, at same height, leaving trail of heavy black smoke. Appeared to burn for about 1 minute before falling away. Travelled alongside Lancaster."

2. The amplified report is now to hand from the pilot, of R/49 (P/O. Simpson), which reads thus -

"52 14N 13 20E, 1949 hours, 23,000 ft., 227 deg. True.
It was a ball of red fire on port side 2 miles away at same height with yellowish red flame coming out behind and black smoke. It was 30/40 m.p.h. faster than the Lancaster (about 150 I.A.S.) It went like this for a period of ½ to 1 minute. It did not explode at any time. Fizzled out and not seen again. The smoke was very black and showed up well against greyish night background. It followed when Lancaster went into a dive and again on corkscrewing. It seemed to go out once but sprang into life again when Lancaster changed from dive to starboard into a corkscrew."

for Group Captain, Commanding,
No. 52 Base.

An example from RAF files of ‘rocket phenomena’ reported by aircrew from RAF Bomber Command during the Second World War. These mysterious UFOs were described as ‘foo-fighters’ by US Army Air Force crews. AIR 41/2076

Horton's term 'through the gate' refers to a technique by which Lancaster pilots could move the throttle sideways and forwards, breaking a wire, 'the gate', in the process. This would give considerable extra power, but put an immense additional strain on the engines. Horton continued evasive action for 10 minutes, during which time all the crew except him and the bomb aimer could see the pursuing balls of light. Whatever the objects were they stayed close to the Lancaster, duplicating its every move, until they reached the Dutch coast when, in the words of one of the gunners, 'they seemed to burn themselves out'.

Exhausted but relieved, Horton flew the Lancaster safely back to England. His attempts at evasive action had caused a serious mechanical fault that forced the crew to land at a different airfield. Horton and his crew were baffled by the experience, and could only presume they had been chased by a German secret weapon, perhaps a radio-controlled anti-aircraft rocket. Upon reporting their experience to the intelligence officers at debriefing, they were met not with interest but ridicule. Nevertheless, Horton stuck to his account and would not be persuaded that he and his crew had imagined the experience.

Although Horton stated that he had never heard of any similar stories at the time, his description is entirely consistent with those of aircrews of other nationalities during the Second World War. American bomber crews coined the phrase 'foo-fighters' in or around 1943 to describe the strange moving balls of fire that pursued their aircraft during nighttime raids over Germany. No-one is certain where it came from but it may have originated in a popular 1940s US cartoon strip featuring a madcap fireman, Smokey Stover, whose catchphrase was 'where there's foo, there's fire'. Alternatively 'foo' may come from the French word for fire (feu) as the phenomenon was often being described as resembling a fireball.

Whatever its origin, while 'foo-fighter' was a term familiar to aircrew serving with the United States Army Air Force (USAAF), it would have been unfamiliar to RAF pilots who observed similar lights during missions over Europe. Their reports were referred to by the Air Ministry as 'night phenomena' and 'balls of fire'. Research by my colleague Andy Roberts has revealed that individual RAF aircrew developed their own terminology for UFOs they saw during combat missions. Based on information gleaned from interviews with surviving aircrew and accounts from personal logbooks, he discovered 'The Light', or 'The Thing' was used by RAF crews from 1942.

The latter was the one Horton employed.

A number of baffled aircrew tried to rationalise their experiences as evidence of advanced Axis secret weapons or guided 'rockets', referring to them in those terms in flight logs and debriefings, but evidence soon emerged that the phenomenon was being observed by men on all sides. Dr R.V. Jones, director of intelligence for Britain's Air Staff during the war, later said the Air Ministry was unable to explain the reports it received, 'and when we asked German night-fighter crews they said they had seen them as well'.[20] Similar reports were also made by aircrew in the Far East theatre of war, and one classic photograph appears to show 'foo-fighters' accompanying a flight of Japanese Takikawa-Kawasaki 98 fighters over the Suzuka Mountains during 1945.

A photograph said to show ‘foo-fighters’ and Japanese fighter aircraft over the Suzuka Mountains in 1945.

In the First World War, the British government was led to pour scarce resources into the investigation of phantom airships and mysterious ‘floating lights’ in case it offered evidence of enemy activity. In the Second World War, the allies investigated foo-fighters for exactly the same reason. Air Ministry and USAAF inquiries during the Second World War reached similar conclusions to the GHQ study in 1916.

Allied Air Intelligence had access to a wealth of information on all kinds of unexplained radar trackings and reports of ‘mystery’ aircraft and unusual rockets and flak. Each sighting was carefully analysed in the context of known weaponry, enemy tactics and the psychological problems of misperception. A report by the military intelligence branch MI 14, circulated in December 1942, discounted the idea that such phenomena could be remote-controlled Nazi weapons and dismissed most reports as ‘freaks’. For his part, R.V. Jones recalled that ‘we tended to interpret them as either aberrations under the stress of operation, or misinterpretations of some phenomena or other’.[21]

Dr (later Professor) Reginald Victor Jones was director of intelligence for the Air Ministry during the Second World War. Later, as head of scientific intelligence at the Ministry of Defence, he became involved in the investigation of the UFO mystery.

Dr Jones's conclusions are echoed in the words of the late Goon Show star Michael Bentine, who served as an intelligence officer in RAF Bomber Command during 1943–4. In a 1992 interview he described debriefing several crews who had seen unidentified lights in the sky during raids on the Baltic coast. 'They fired at the lights, which didn't shoot back. These lights didn't seem to do anything, just pulse and go round. We put it down to fatigue, but later, after I had sent the reports in, an American G2 Intelligence Officer told us that their bombers saw lights in the sky – "foo-fighters" he called them.'[22]

Bentine also described how he debriefed a Polish bomber unit based in England. They claimed that silver-blue balls appeared near their wing on six missions during the autumn of 1943. These tailed the planes as they raided the Nazi V-weapons base at Peenemunde. The crews told Bentine it must be a new weapon. 'But what did it do to you?' Bentine inquired. 'Nothing,' they replied. 'Well it was not a very effective weapon, was it?' he pointed out. Bentine's last statement accurately sums up the conclusions reached by the Air Ministry and USAAF during their study of these phenomena. Whatever the foo-fighters were, they did not appear to pose a threat to aircraft.

Did Churchill order a UFO cover-up?

'Churchill feared panic over UFOs' screamed newspaper headlines in August 2010 after The National Archives released 5,000 pages of information from the MoD's UFO files. Of the hundreds of reports, letters and drawings contained in those files one was singled out for international media coverage, all because of the alleged involvement of Britain's wartime Prime Minister.

The substance of the story was a letter from a scientist in Leicester sent to the MoD in 1999 who claimed that, in the middle of the Second World War, Churchill ordered the cover-up of an encounter between a UFO and a RAF bomber crew.[1] The story told by the anonymous scientist was that sometime during the early 1940s, whilst returning from a mission over Europe, a RAF reconnaissance aircraft was 'intercepted by an object of unknown origin.' The metallic object appeared suddenly at the side of the aircraft as it approached the English coast, hovered noiselessly for a time whilst matching its course and speed, then accelerated away at high speed. During this close encounter, photographs were taken by at least one crew member.

The letter writer claimed he was the grandson of a RAF officer who was 'part of the personal bodyguard' of the PM during the Second World War. His grandfather was present during a discussion between Churchill and Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, the Commander of Allied Forces and future US President, when the incident was discussed. At the meeting, a scientific adviser 'dismissed any possibility that the object had been a missile' and when another raised 'the possibility of an unidentified flying object', Churchill declared the incident 'should be immediately classified for at least 50 years and its status reviewed by a future Prime Minister'. According to the story Churchill believed a cover-up was necessary because its release: '… would create mass panic amongst the general population and destroy one's belief in the church.'

Although this story was just one of hundreds of similar rumours and legends that found their way into the correspondence files of the UFO desk, the writer pleaded 'not to dismiss my attempts to pursue this matter as trivial or motivated by "crackpot" thinking'. In response he was told by MoD that 'we know of no closed records from World War 2 on this subject' and most UFO files before 1962 had been destroyed due to their mundane content.

When examined closely, the story resembles an urban legend, told by 'a friend of a friend', a type frequently found in UFO literature. The letter writer reveals that his grandfather died in 1973, so the information was not first hand, or even second hand. He says that, fearful of his obligations under the Official Secrets Act, his grandfather mentioned the incident only once to his daughter (the writer's father) when she was nine years old. In 1999 she saw a TV programme on UFOs 'which featured an interview with a former RAF airman who described a similar (or the same) event'. This prompted her to reveal the anecdote to her son. Equally questionable is the reference to 'unidentified flying objects' made by Churchill's adviser in the story. As the phrase 'UFO' was invented by the USAF in 1950 (see Chapter 2), it would not have been used in a wartime context a decade earlier.

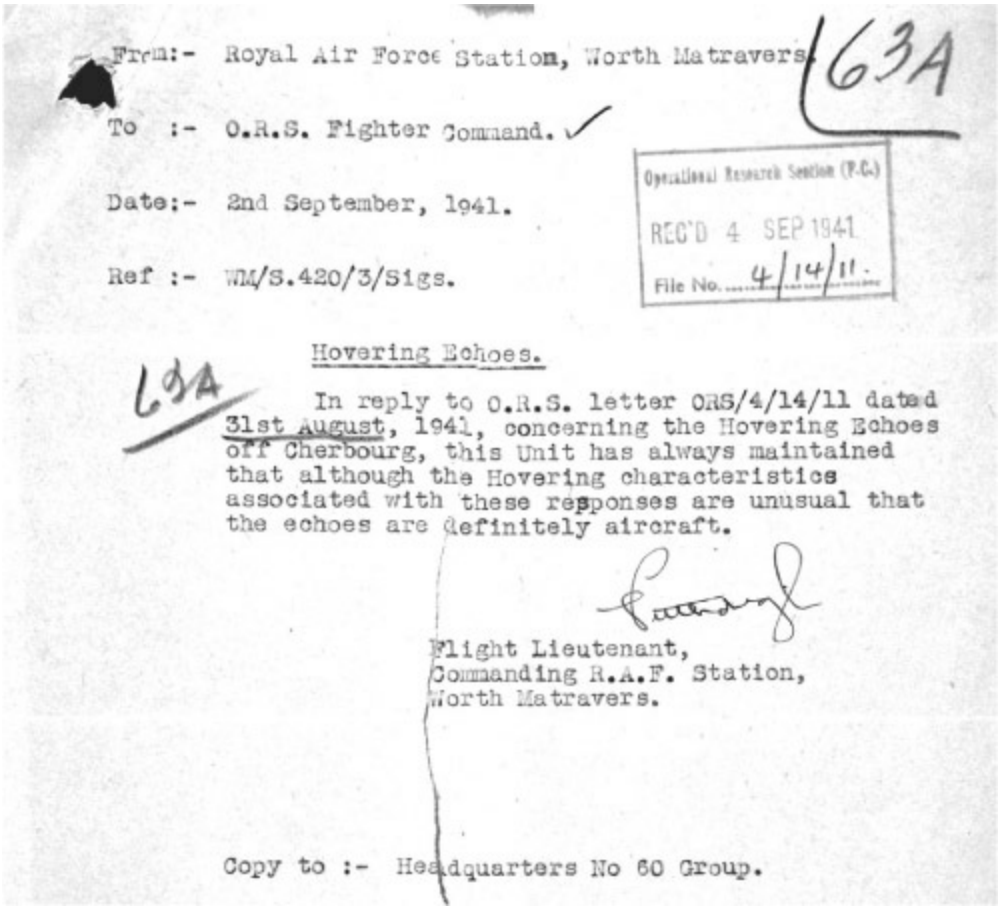
Although the basis for the story is hearsay, it may still contain a grain of truth. Winston Churchill's famous 1952 memo that demanded to know 'the truth about flying saucers' is a matter of public record (see Chapter 2). Churchill was an old man during his final term of office as Prime Minister. His private secretary, Sir Anthony Montague-Browne, assured me that his interest in UFOs was 'purely ephemeral… he wanted to know the facts in case he was questioned in Parliament. That was all.' Nevertheless, his interest in the unsolved visit by a 'phantom airship' to Sheerness before the First World War

(see p. 6) suggests that he was well aware of the potential threat posed to national security by unidentified flying objects, alien or otherwise, at periods of international tension. Files at The National Archives reveal that during the Second World War both the British Air Ministry and the US Army Air Force collected and studied unusual sightings reported by aircrew. Details of some of the more reliable sightings were passed up the chain of command and reached top brass at HQ Bomber Command. Given the concern within Churchill's War Cabinet about Nazi secret weapons, air intelligence were alert to any evidence of new technology from the theatre of war. It is possible that a discussion about one of these wartime experiences was overheard by someone during the war and, repeated years later to a nine-year-old child, became transformed into yet another UFO legend. We will never know for sure.

RADAR ANGELS

A parallel mystery to UFOs encountered in the air is that of UFOs tracked on radar, something that is often a key element of modern accounts. Even before news of the first sightings of foo-fighters reached the Allies, operators had been perplexed by strange blips that appeared and disappeared on their screens as they controlled aircraft movements. Sometimes these appeared to move at incredible speeds, faster than any man-made aircraft of the day.

Radar was developed by British scientists during the 1930s as an early warning system against German bombers. Before the outbreak of war the Air Ministry secretly built a string of radar stations, known as Chain Home or CH, along the east coast of England that was to provide a crude first warning of German air raids. In 1940, during the Battle of Britain, this 'secret weapon' gave the RAF a crucial tactical advantage over the superior strength of the Luftwaffe. Although at this time Britain's air defence system was the most advanced in the world, radar itself was far from foolproof, as demonstrated by a series of strange incidents the following year.



From:- Royal Air Force Station, Worth Matravers.

163A

To :- O.R.S. Fighter Command.

Date:- 2nd September, 1941.

Ref :- WM/S.420/3/Sigs.

Operational Research Section (F.C.)
REC'D 4 SEP 1941
File No. 4/14/11.

Hovering Echoes.

163A

In reply to O.R.S. letter ORS/4/14/11 dated 31st August, 1941, concerning the Hovering Echoes off Cherbourg, this Unit has always maintained that although the Hovering characteristics associated with these responses are unusual that the echoes are definitely aircraft.

Flight Lieutenant,
Commanding R.A.F. Station,
Worth Matravers.

Copy to :- Headquarters No 60 Group.

Extract from an Air Ministry file on mysterious ‘hovering echoes’ tracked over the English Channel by RAF radars during 1941. Senior officers initially believed these were part of a German invasion force, but fighters sent to investigate found nothing. AVIA 7/1070

Late on the night of 20 March 1941, with the threat of a German invasion still strong, RAF Fighter Command was placed on alert when the CH system reported an attack on Britain's south coast. Records at The National Archives show that up to five separate stations saw what seemed to be a massive formation of blips moving slowly across the channel precisely as would be expected if a massive night raid by German bombers was under way. As tension grew, the blips approached from the direction of the Cherbourg peninsula until they reached a point 40 miles from the Dorset coast when they faded from the screen. The following night the blips returned and for a period of weeks CH stations continued to report both mass formations and individual echoes. Senior officers began to fear these could be part of a sophisticated German plot to jam British radar with false signals as aircraft or towed gliders prepared for a real invasion.[23]

A few years ago I had the opportunity to discuss these weird incidents with Sir Edward Fennessey CBE, who served on the RAF scientific staff responsible for the CH radars during the war. Sir Edward, who died in 2010 at the age of 97, said the radar sightings were taken seriously as the RAF was expecting a German invasion. 'Immediate orders were given to intercept, but when fighters were in position to intercept no targets could be found. Ground radar continued to plot the targets and we urgently contacted the Radar Research Station (TRE) then based in Swanage. They suggested various adjustments to the CH to eliminate false plots, but [they] remained tracking towards England until after some time they faded.'[24]

After the war Sir Edward told this story at a dinner party where he entertained guests with his theory that the echoes were really guardian angels, 'the souls of British soldiers killed in France over the centuries returning to defend their country'. Although it was intended as a joke, this idea caught the imagination of serving airmen who were regularly seeing 'ghosts' on their radar screens: they called them 'radar angels'.

MORE THAN IMAGINATION?

During the Second World War, Sir Edward recalled that no explanation was ever found for radar angels and pointed out that 'busy fighting a war, we spent no time investigating this phenomena'. However, as in the First World War, the government sometimes did feel forced to act. By 1945 so many puzzling foo-

fighter reports were reaching the Allies that scientific intelligence officers attached to Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), commanded by the US General Dwight D. Eisenhower, were asked to investigate. In February 1945 British officers attached to SHAEF told the Air Ministry: '… it would seem that there must be something more than imagination behind the matter, and in view of the fact that pilots and crew are becoming slightly worried by them, it is considered that everything possible should be done to get to the root of the matter.'[25]

Responding on 13 March, Group Captain E.D.M. Hopkins of the Air Ministry said intelligence officers in London had carefully studied the sightings. They decided, 'a few of the alleged aircraft may have been Me 262 [Luftwaffe jet fighters] and for the rest, flak rockets are suggested as the most likely explanation'. He added: 'The whole affair is still something of a mystery and the evidence is very sketchy and varied so that no definite and satisfactory explanation can yet be given.'[26]

The one consistent feature that concerned the Allies was that foo-fighters paced and followed aircraft in a controlled, seemingly intelligent manner. At the time, the Allies knew the Germans were experimenting with a host of unorthodox weapons, including jet aircraft such as the Me 262 and futuristic-looking bat-wing-shaped 'flying wings'. When the allies overran Nazi Germany in 1945 they captured a number of designs for advanced aircraft, but they found the Axis forces did not have the capability to produce guided weapons that could twist and turn whilst following an aeroplane and certainly not for the lengths of time reported.

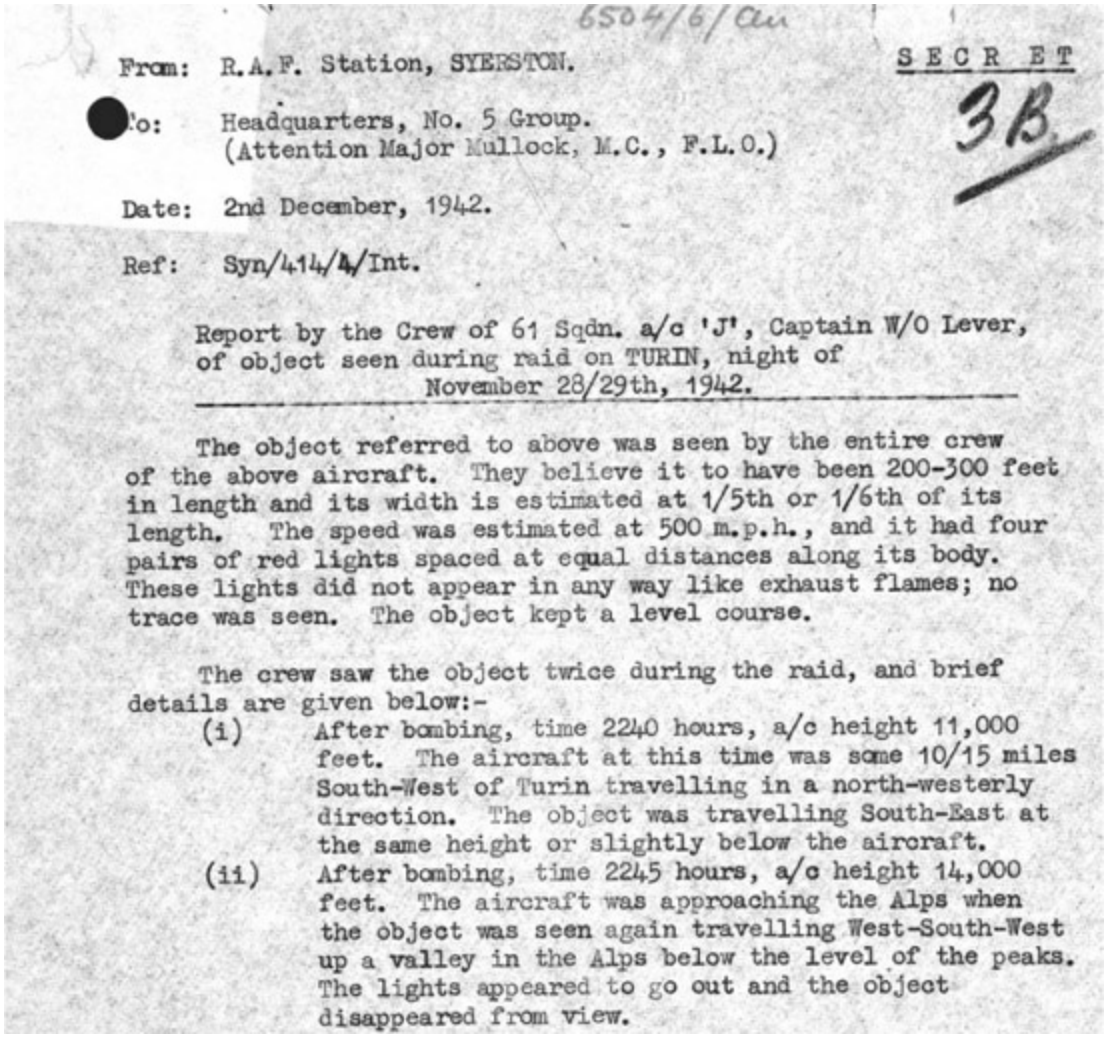
During this period, a scientific intelligence officer serving with SHAEF called Bob Robertson carried out a study of foo-fighter sightings reported by American aircrew. Robertson was a friend of Britain's R.V. Jones and was an eminent physicist in his own right. After the war, in his role as a scientific adviser to the CIA, Robertson was asked to convene a secret panel to examine any potential threat posed by UFOs to national security. Although copies of his wartime foo-fighter study have not survived, Robertson summarised his findings for the panel on UFOs that he convened in 1953. In his report he described foo-fighters as: '… unexplained phenomena sighted by aircraft pilots during the Second World War in both European and Far East theatres of operation, wherein "balls of light" would fly near or with the aircraft and maneuver rapidly. They were believed to be electrostatic (similar to St Elmo's

Fire) or electro-magnetic phenomena or possibly light reflections from ice crystals in the air, but their exact cause or nature was never defined.'[27]

The Roberston panel concluded, as Michael Bentine had done in 1943, that foo-fighters were 'unexplained but not dangerous'. Once it had been ascertained that these UFOs did not explode, open fire on Allied aircraft or display aggressive characteristics, Air Intelligence was content to let the matter drop, maintaining a watching brief. There was a war on and they could not afford to waste time and money chasing phantoms of the skies. Both Bob Robertson and Dr R.V. Jones remained interested in reports of unexplained phenomena and would eventually play significant roles in official investigations during the post-war UFO era. But Robertson clearly was not happy to dismiss the sightings just by giving them a name and he observed that: 'if the term "flying saucers" had been popular in 1943–45, these objects [foo-fighters] would have been so labeled.'[28]

UFOS OVER THE ALPS?

Witness accounts and documentary evidence indicate the majority of foo-fighter sightings were of small spherical objects. Some seem similar to the accounts of ball lightning sent to the Meteorological Office in 1921. Indeed more recently there have been accounts of ball lightning pursuing and even entering aircraft during storms. However, among the testimonies of pilots in the Second World War, there are a few stories describing large, apparently structured objects.



6504/6/Air

From: R.A.F. Station, SYERSTON.

SECRET

3B

To: Headquarters, No. 5 Group.
(Attention Major Mullock, M.C., F.L.O.)

Date: 2nd December, 1942.

Ref: Syn/414/A/Int.

Report by the Crew of 61 Sqdn. a/c 'J', Captain W/O Lever, of object seen during raid on TURIN, night of November 28/29th, 1942.

The object referred to above was seen by the entire crew of the above aircraft. They believe it to have been 200-300 feet in length and its width is estimated at 1/5th or 1/6th of its length. The speed was estimated at 500 m.p.h., and it had four pairs of red lights spaced at equal distances along its body. These lights did not appear in any way like exhaust flames; no trace was seen. The object kept a level course.

The crew saw the object twice during the raid, and brief details are given below:-

(i) After bombing, time 2240 hours, a/c height 11,000 feet. The aircraft at this time was some 10/15 miles South-West of Turin travelling in a north-westerly direction. The object was travelling South-East at the same height or slightly below the aircraft.

(ii) After bombing, time 2245 hours, a/c height 14,000 feet. The aircraft was approaching the Alps when the object was seen again travelling West-South-West up a valley in the Alps below the level of the peaks. The lights appeared to go out and the object disappeared from view.

During the Second World War, the Air Ministry collected a number of reports of 'rocket phenomena'. This extraordinary example was made by a bomber crew during a raid on Turin on the night of 28/29 November 1942. AIR 14/2076

One extraordinary example can be found in the Royal Air Force files at The National Archives with 'Secret' stamped on it. At the time it was judged to be of such significance that details were sent directly to the headquarters of RAF Bomber Command with a covering letter from the Air Vice Marshal of No. 5 Group, RAF, which read: '… Herewith a copy of a report received from a crew of a Lancaster after a raid on Turin. The crew refuses to be shaken in their story in the face of the usual banter and ridicule.'[29]

The report describes an aerial object seen by the entire crew of a Lancaster bomber during a bombing raid on Turin, northern Italy, during the night of 28/29 November 1942. Twice during the raid Captain Lever and the crew of the Lancaster from 61 Squadron, based at Syerston in Lincolnshire, saw an object 200–300 ft in length that travelled at a speed they estimated at 500 mph. They said it had four pairs of red lights spaced at equal distances along its body and flew on a level course. When first seen, after the bombing at 10.40 pm, it appeared to be 10 or 15 miles southwest of the city travelling at the same height as the Lancaster. Five minutes later as the Lancaster approached the Alps at 14,000 ft, the crew saw it again, travelling in a southwesterly direction up a valley but above the mountain peaks. It disappeared when the red lights it carried went out.

The report concluded by stating that '[Captain Lever] has seen a similar object about three months ago north of Amsterdam. In this instance it appeared to be on the ground and later travelling at high speed at a lower level than the heights given above along the coast for about two seconds; the lights then went out for the same period of time and came on again, and the object was still seen to be travelling in the same direction'.[30]

It is difficult to know what to make of this sighting. RAF Bomber Command was impressed by the sincerity of Lever's report, and the fact that his crew was bold enough to repeat their fantastic story to their incredulous colleagues. Nonetheless, the object they saw resembles no known aircraft flying at that time and this case remains one of the most unusual UFO mysteries from the period.

BOMBERS' MOON

One spectacular account from the penultimate year of the Second World War, however, seems to provide a classic description of a flying saucer from the

pre-flying saucer age. In 1944 Ronald Claridge was a radio operator in a Lancaster from 7 Squadron, part of the Pathfinder Force that flew from RAF Oakington in Cambridgeshire. His Lancaster was returning from a night-time raid on oil refineries at Pelice in southern France on 11 August when his close encounter began.

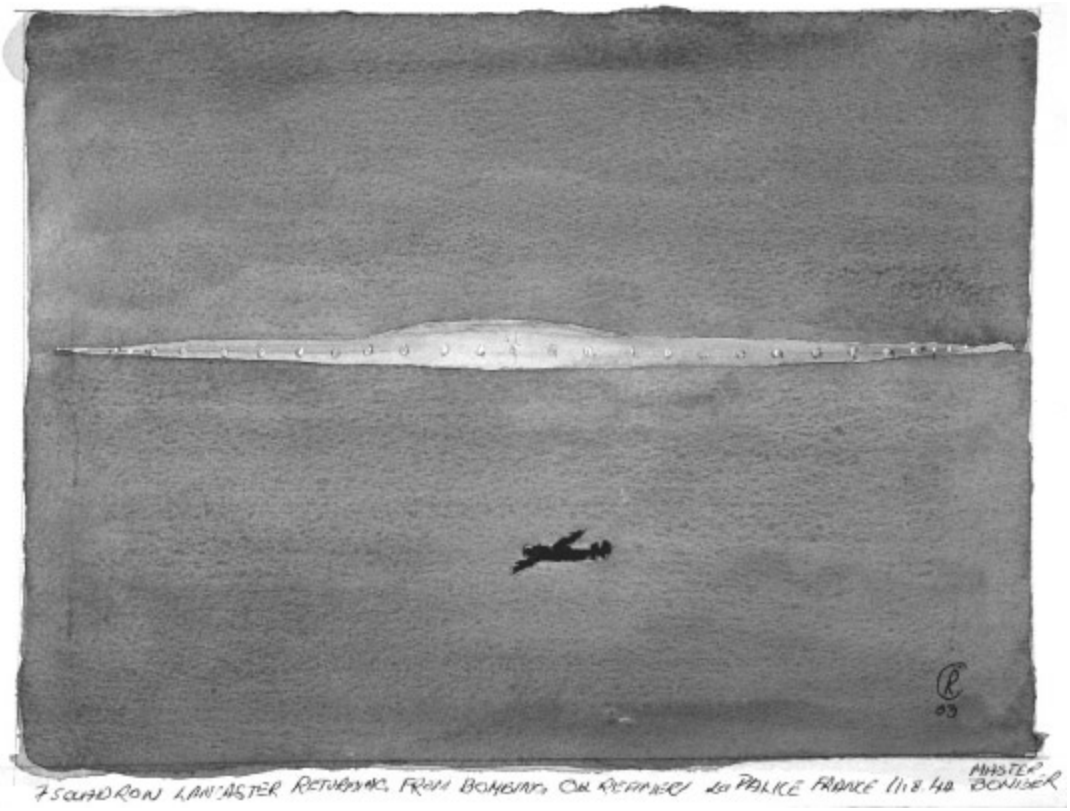
More than 50 years later Claridge recalled how he was hunched over the aircraft's radar, scanning for enemy night-fighters during the anxious flight home, when the screen suddenly went blank. As he reported the malfunction to his pilot, Squadron Leader (later Air Commodore) Brian Frow, he heard him yell: 'what the hell was that?' Claridge moved quickly into the astrodome of the bomber and immediately saw what appeared to be 'an enormous string of lights' on the starboard side of the plane. He recalls, 'the lights were circular, rather like portholes in a ship. The colour was a very bright yellow changing to intense white. My estimate was that they were about a thousand yards from our aeroplane. The ones nearest our Lancaster were the largest and brightest, they stretched fore and aft to what seemed infinity. After about thirty seconds I could see they were part of an enormous disc.'[31]

The watercolour painting Ronald Claridge produced illustrates just how large this UFO was, dwarfing the Lancaster in the night sky. All eight crew had been alerted by the intercom chatter and could now see the phenomenon and were left strangely transfixed by the experience. Claridge recalled: 'we had no feelings of fear but feelings of great calm… even our gunners who would normally open fire were helpless.' He timed the incident for his radar log at three minutes before the object 'suddenly shot ahead and was gone. We were travelling at 240 miles per hour but there was no turbulence. There was no noise of engines or vapour of any kind'.

The Lancaster crew were left stunned and spoke very little for the rest of the journey home. On return to Oakington they were debriefed by RAF intelligence who appeared more interested in their feelings of well-being than the details of their experience. Claridge recalls being warned not to discuss the incident or make any entry about it in his logbook. Nevertheless, he told me 'we all had sensed we were being watched by another force outside our knowledge'.

By the time Claridge made his sighting, almost 50 years passed since the airship scares that had so gripped Britain, and in that time aircraft had become a common sight in our skies. Thousands of aircraft were now daily taking part

in operations. The dramatic increase in air traffic naturally meant that if UFOs existed they would be seen and reported with corresponding frequency. But as the war came to an end there was still no widely recognised category into which airmen such as Ron Claridge could place their strange experiences, until the age of the flying saucer finally arrived.



A painting by Ronald Claridge depicting the huge disc-shaped UFO he and his crew saw from their Lancaster bomber during a raid on southern France in 1944.

CHAPTER 2
The Flying Saucer Age

As the world emerged from the Second World War, the idea that Earth could be under observation or visited by aliens from another world remained largely confined to the realms of science fiction and fantasy. As the Cold War began, people in the West were initially preoccupied not with the idea of life on other worlds, but with the possibility of a future nuclear war with the Soviet Union. As a result, the military authorities continued to seek terrestrial explanations for reports of strange flying objects in the sky.

The first appearance of flying saucers was preceded by reports of strange rocket-shaped flying objects from parts of Scandinavia during the summer of 1946. According to a British intelligence report in the Ministry of Defence's files at The National Archives, news of these sightings was seized on by the press who began using words such as 'ghost rockets' and 'spook bombs'. The report says the first sightings were made in Sweden: '… and for some months there was a considerable number of sightings, mostly in Sweden, but a few also in Norway, Finland and Germany. The descriptions given were usually of some sort of wingless missile travelling at a very high speed, cigar-shaped or circular, sometimes emitting bright lights, and occasionally sound.'[1]

Scientist and wartime genius Dr. R. V. Jones, who was then the Air Ministry's director of intelligence, recalled that some of his colleagues believed these flying bombs could be modified V-2 rockets captured by the Russians at the end of the war. Western intelligence agencies, though, wanted to know for sure who had designed these 'ghost rockets' and what their purpose might be. Documents at The National Archives show how both the War Office and the Air Ministry quickly became involved in secret negotiations with the Swedish government in an attempt to solve the mystery.[2] Secret agents were sent to Scandinavia and advanced radar equipment was offered to the Swedes to assist in tracing the flight path taken by the rockets.

Air intelligence produced two detailed papers summarising their investigations. The contents of these reveal a simmering internal debate

between those in the intelligence community who believed the rockets were Russian, and those who believed they were a case of post-war nerves. For example one official '… felt this demonstration, if of Russian origin, would be intended to counteract the effect of American atom bomb experiments, by implying the Russians also possess a high performance weapon'.[3]

The first of these reports, circulated widely within Western intelligence during September 1946, was written by Dr R. V. Jones.[4] He was sceptical about the Russian theory and compared the rocket scare with other pre-war social panics, such as rumours the Nazis had developed a death ray. He concluded that something unusual had been seen, but felt most of the 'rockets' were actually descriptions of spectacular daylight meteors. Why, he asked his colleagues, would the Russians risk alerting the West to the existence of advanced rockets by firing them over neutral Sweden? From his point of view, only the discovery of physical evidence could establish the truth. During the war the Nazis only achieved 90 per cent reliability in their trials of V-weapons and Jones argued that even if the Soviets could achieve 99 per cent reliability, wreckage of at least one rocket should have been found somewhere in Scandinavia.

By November 1946 the sceptics had gained the upper hand. The numbers of sightings decreased and a second air intelligence report concluded there was very little evidence that any missiles had flown or been fired over Scandinavia. In his memoirs Jones described the 1946 panic as: 'a diversion… which no doubt arose from the general atmosphere of apprehension that existed in 1945 regarding the motives of the Russians, and which anticipated the flying saucer.'[5]

THE COMING OF THE SAUCERS

The ghost rocket scare was followed just nine months later by the first sightings of 'flying saucers' over North America. During this intermediate period radar operators in England continued to be plagued by unexplained blips on their screens similar to those tracked during the Second World War (see p. 22).

A fascinating example of one incident survives in the official Air Force records at The National Archives. According to these, RAF stations were placed on alert early in January 1947 after unidentified aircraft were tracked

by Britain's wartime Chain Home radars. The most alarming incident occurred on the night of 16 January when a ground radar at Trimley Heath, near Felixstowe, tracked what was described as a 'strange plot' at 38,000 ft, 50 miles from the Dutch coast during a Bomber Command exercise over the North Sea. The unidentified blip appeared to be descending erratically and was calculated to be moving at a speed faster than sound. It is worth noting here that history records Chuck Yeager's flight in the experimental Bell XS-I rocket plane, some nine months later, as being the first time the sound barrier was broken.

A concerned HQ Fighter Command immediately ordered a Mosquito to divert from the Bomber Command exercise to intercept the mystery aircraft. A cat-and-mouse chase then ensued for roughly 40 minutes as the Mosquito pursued the unidentified target towards the Norfolk coastline. The blip had descended to 17,000 ft when the Mosquito crew began their interception. However, although the aircraft's own radar appeared to detect the presence of something on at least two occasions, the pilot was unable to see it in the dark skies. Whatever was out there on that night appeared to take what was described as 'efficient controlled evasive action'. Soon afterwards the Mosquito crew lost their quarry and the interception was abandoned.[6]

This startling incident was just the first of a series that continued for a number of weeks. An investigation, code-named 'Operation Charlie', was launched, which led to some (though not all) of the blips detected on radar being identified to the Air Ministry's satisfaction as friendly aircraft and meteorological balloons. In April details were leaked to the Daily Mail which splashed the story across its front page under the headline: 'Ghost Plane over Coast: RAF spot it – can't catch it'.[7] Newspaper stories dubbed these unexplained radar blips as 'ghost planes' and speculation about their origin ranged from smugglers to Russian spy planes developed from captured Nazi technology.

Documents from the US National Archives show that in August 1947 the American Army Air Force were sent a secret summary of the Operation Charlie incidents by the Air Ministry. Their conclusion read: 'No explanation of this incident has been forthcoming nor has it been repeated.'[8] By this time, however, the United States Army Air Force (USAAF) had begun to be inundated with strange sightings of their own.

KENNETH ARNOLD'S UFOS

The flying saucer age can be said to have truly begun shortly after 3.00 pm on 24 June 1947 as Kenneth Arnold, a private pilot, cruised above the Cascade Mountains of Washington State in his light aircraft. He was searching for the wreckage of a transport plane when his attention was suddenly attracted by 'a tremendous bright flash' towards Mount Rainier. As he scanned the sky he spotted a group of 'nine peculiar looking aircraft' directly in front of him, 25–30 miles away at around 10,000 ft. The aircraft were flying in echelon formation but were, he realised, of a most unusual shape, 'flat like a pie pan and somewhat bat-shaped', with the lead craft flying slightly higher than the rest. As he watched, this strange formation shined as it reflected the sun and appeared to be following the mountain ridges below in a peculiar undulating motion.

Initially Arnold had thought the objects were snow geese, but he quickly realised they were flying too high and at incredible speed. Timing them as they moved between distant mountain peaks, Arnold was amazed to find they were travelling at speeds unheard of at that date. Eventually they disappeared towards Mount Adams in the south.

On landing at Yakima Airfield, Arnold told his story and by the time he reached Pendleton in Utah the next day, news had reached the press and he was asked to describe what he had seen. Arnold was later emphatic that he did not call them flying saucers, but that was to be the phrase that caught the world's imagination. Interviewed for the ITV programme Arthur C. Clarke's Mysterious World in 1980, four years before his death, Arnold said: 'When I was asked how the objects flew I said "they flew like a saucer would if you skipped it across water"… and then of course all of a sudden the terms flying disc, crescent-shaped and what-not was completely dropped and everyone started seeing flying saucers. And they've been seeing them ever since!'

Kenneth Arnold's seminal sighting of 'flying saucers' in June 1947 featured in the first edition of the American magazine Fate.

This was a gift for headline writers and before June was out flying saucers had become a household phrase around the globe. In Britain, for example, a trawl through the Mass Observation Project Archive records reveals the following charming diary entry by a Sheffield woman who wrote on Sunday 6 July 1947: 'Husband much keyed up about the flying saucers over American skies. One of his pet subjects. Papers can't report enough about them to satisfy him. Just like a small boy about it.'[9] As the historian Hilary Evans noted, 'looking back to that day… when flying saucers arrived, we can see that they were unquestionably an idea whose time had come.'[10]

Newspapers were quickly inundated with stories of further sightings, some made months or even years before Arnold's report. Many of these described 'flying discs' but there were also wingless torpedo- and cigar-shaped objects that recalled the 'ghost rockets'; others were spherical or oval in shape, or simply luminous shapes seen in the night sky. At the time, Arnold has said he assumed the strange aircraft he saw were guided missiles or secret prototype aircraft – a possibility that was pounced on by the media but quickly denied by the US authorities.

This preoccupation with secret weapons was represented in the responses to the first opinion poll on the subject of flying saucers. Conducted by the Gallup organisation and published less than two months after Arnold's sighting, the poll found an incredible nine out of ten Americans had already heard of flying saucers. Gallup found that 15 per cent of Americans believed that the saucers could be some new form of American military hardware, while, in a nod to Cold War tensions, another one per cent thought they could be Russian in origin.[11] But while a significant proportion of respondents believed that the saucers could be the result of misperception or an outright hoax, one possible explanation is at this stage conspicuous by its absence: the belief, later to become widespread, that flying saucers could be of extraterrestrial origin.

THE ROSWELL INCIDENT

One final piece of the jigsaw had to fall into place before the genesis of the flying saucer legend could be complete. On 8 July 1947, whilst the news media was still buzzing with saucer stories, a press release arrived from Roswell Army Air Force base in New Mexico. This part of the US southwest was (and

still is) home to some of America's most secretive defence establishments. It was here that the atomic bomb was developed and tested in great secrecy during the Second World War. After the war, secret research continued on German V-2 rockets and aircraft captured from the Axis forces. Roswell itself was home to the US Army Air Force's 509th Bomber Wing, at that time the only nuclear-equipped air force in the world.

The announcement from Roswell's press officer, Lieutenant Walter Haut, read as follows: 'The many rumours regarding the flying disc became a reality yesterday when the intelligence office of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disc through the cooperation of one of the local ranchers and the sheriff's office of Chaves county.'

The statement said the flying object appeared to have landed, not crashed, on a ranch near Roswell a week earlier. It continued: 'Not having phone facilities, the rancher stored the disc until such time as he was able to contact the Sheriff's office, who in turn notified Major Jesse A. Marcel of the 509th Bomb Group Intelligence Office. Action was immediately taken and the disc was picked up at the rancher's home. It was inspected at the Roswell Army Air Field and subsequently loaned by Major Marcel to higher headquarters…'[12]

News that a 'flying saucer' had been captured by the US military spread like wildfire. Coming so soon after Kenneth Arnold's report it suggested the mystery could be solved very quickly. The initial excitement was then dampened almost immediately when the 8th Army headquarters at Fort Worth announced that the 'flying disc' had in fact been identified as a weather balloon and therefore had nothing to do with flying saucers. According to the commanding officer, Brigadier Roger Ramey, when the remains were examined by meteorologists the 'disc' was found to be of 'flimsy construction, like a box-kite'.

cannot go on statements made in the House of Commons."

British - administered Solomon Group.

SHERIFF CAPTURES FLYING SAUCER

Lent To "Higher Quarters"

ROSWELL, New Mexico, Tuesday.

THE U.S. Army Air Force announced here tonight that a "flying saucer" had been found on a nearby ranch, and was now in the Army's possession.

The find was made "some time last week," according to Lieutenant Warren Haught, Public Information Officer of Roswell Army Airfield.

He added that the saucer had been turned over to the airfield through the co-operation of the sheriff's office. It was inspected at Roswell field and subsequently "lent to higher quarters."

Another report said the disc was taken away in a Flying Fortress.

Stored on Ranch

More Tyres Coming

SIR HAROLD KENWARD, President of the Car Manufacturers' conference, disclosed yesterday that a British tyre industry mission to the U.S. had obtained promise of a substantial increase by next month in supplies of carbon

The 'Roswell incident' was widely reported by newspapers and radio bulletins across the world, including this example from the Sheffield Telegraph.

This announcement killed the story and Roswell disappeared into obscurity for a further three decades. It did not make headlines again until 1980 when a book, The Roswell Incident, by Charles Berlitz and William Moore, resurrected the story. The authors interviewed Major Jesse Marcel, named in the original press release and now retired from the United States Air Force. Accompanied by two other USAAF officers, Marcel had personally examined fragments of the wreckage found at the Roswell ranch in 1947.

Some 30 years afterwards, he said this consisted of small beams containing writing like hieroglyphics and metal like tinfoil that was extremely tough. He said: 'It was something I had never seen before, or since, for that matter… I didn't know what it was but it certainly wasn't anything built by us and it most certainly wasn't any weather balloon.'[13]

The book also featured rumours that bodies of small creatures had been recovered from the wreckage of this and other saucer crashes in remote desert regions of the US southwest, all of which had been removed by the military under great secrecy. The authors claimed the truth – that the US government had captured alien technology – had been concealed ever since. This account gave birth to one of the most enduring conspiracy theories of modern times, the UFO cover-up.

That something happened at Roswell is not in doubt. What is less certain is what that something might have been. The official explanation of what took place has changed several times since 1947 and this ambiguity has been seen by some as proof of Berlitz and Moore's claims. In 1993 a US congressman for New Mexico, Steven Schiff, asked the General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of the American Congress, to search the official files for evidence. His intervention led to the production of a USAF report titled The Roswell Files: Fact Versus Fiction in the New Mexico Desert. Published in 1995, this concluded that there was after all a balloon connection. The 'disc' had been part of a classified Cold War project, code-named Mogul, which used elaborate balloon trains to carry scientific instruments to the upper atmosphere. However, rather than monitoring the weather, these balloons were used to monitor Soviet nuclear experiments. A balloon train from the Mogul project, launched from Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 4 June, was recorded as being lost in the Roswell area and the original descriptions of scattered debris and a 'box-kite structure' do appear to be consistent with the official explanation.

US army meteorologist Irving Newton poses with wreckage of the ‘flying disc’ recovered from the desert near the Roswell Army Air Force base in New Mexico, July 1947. Newton identified the wreckage as fragments from a radar target and the balloon that lifted it.

The report also included a statement by Captain Sheridan Cavitt who was one of the two men who helped Major Marcel collect the debris from the ranch in 1947. Interviewed in 1994, Cavitt's evidence flatly contradicted Marcel's story. He said the debris he handled resembled 'bamboo type square sticks… that were very light, as well as some sort of metallic reflecting material', but he insisted that it did not possess any unusual properties. Captain Cavitt recalled: 'the material was spread out on the ground, but there was no gouge or crater or other obvious sign of impact. I remember recognising the material as being consistent with a weather balloon.' Cavitt added there was no 'secretive effort or heightened security' surrounding the incident and he 'never even thought about it again until well after I retired from the military when I began to be contacted by UFO researchers.'

The 1995 USAF report said the main focus of military concern at the time 'was not on aliens, hostile or otherwise, but on the Soviet Union' and concluded: '[the results of our] research indicated absolutely no evidence of any kind that a spaceship crashed near Roswell or that any alien occupants were recovered therefrom, in some secret military operation.'[14]

Wherever the truth may lie, the Roswell incident demonstrated that flying saucers would remain inextricably bound up with military secrets. In the paranoid Cold War context of that time, intense official interest in the subject was inevitable.

PROJECT SIGN

The United States Air Force (USAF) only became a separate branch of the military on 18 September 1947, but within 5 days of its formation Lieutenant General Nathan F. Twining of Air Materiel Command had sent a secret 'opinion on flying discs' to Brigadier General George Schulgen of the Army Air Force. His view was clear: 'The reported operating characteristics such as extreme rates of climb, manoeuvrability… and motion which must be considered evasive when sighted or contacted by friendly aircraft and radar, lend belief to the possibility that some of the objects are controlled either manually, automatically or remotely.'[15]

Significantly, there is no mention of the Roswell incident in Twining's summary, which was declassified in 1969. Indeed, he specifically refers to 'the lack of physical evidence in the shape of crash-recovered exhibits which

would undeniably prove the existence of these objects'. If the wreckage of a spacecraft had been recovered at Roswell just two months earlier, Twining would surely have known about it. Nevertheless, he took the subject seriously, concluding 'The phenomenon reported is something real and not visionary or fictitious' and recommended that a detailed study be undertaken.

As a direct result of the Air Force's concerns on 30 December 1947, Project Sign was born, with a remit to collect and analyse reports of flying saucers. Within weeks the new project had to deal with the tragic case of a young Air National Guard pilot who died whilst pursuing a strange circular object over Kentucky. Captain Thomas Mantell was the leader of a flight of United States Air Force F-51s sent to investigate the UFO, who flew too high without oxygen, lost consciousness and crashed to his death. Flying saucers were now serious business and could no longer be dismissed as a joke. Following an investigation it was announced that Mantell – an experienced pilot – had actually pursued the planet Venus, which would have been dimly visible in the afternoon sky.

The unconvincing way in which this incident was dealt with provided ammunition to those who smelt a cover-up. The truth would emerge decades later, when it was revealed the object pursued by Mantell was a giant Skyhook balloon released by the US Navy from a base in Minnesota earlier that day. The Skyhook project, like Mogul, was classified secret in 1948 when these events occurred, and the US authorities were prepared to go to great lengths to hide its existence and purpose.

As fears of communist expansion increased, it was logical for the military authorities to concentrate their attention upon the possibility that some of the unexplained saucer sightings could be of Soviet origin. It was known that the Russians had captured German scientists and blueprints of V-weapons and prototype aircraft at the close of the war. For a short time, one faction of the intelligence community believed it was possible these had been developed to produce a disc-shaped aircraft that could reach the US mainland. When it became clear that no terrestrial aircraft could account for the incredible speeds and manoeuvres reported, other explanations had to be considered – and the 'secret weapon' hypothesis was replaced by the idea that saucers could be extraterrestrial in origin.

Captain Edward Ruppelt, who worked for Project Sign and has incidentally been credited as the man who coined the acronym UFO, claimed to have seen a

top secret dossier prepared by Project Sign staff in 1948 that concluded flying saucers were probably interplanetary spacecraft. Among the unexplained sightings listed in the dossier, according to Ruppelt, were the Operation Charlie incidents, investigated by the RAF. The 'Estimate of the Situation', as it was named, was circulated as far as the Chief of the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenberg, who was unconvinced and ordered all copies to be destroyed.[16]

This development marked a major change in the United States Air Force policy, perhaps a direct result of the CIA's growing interest and concern. On 16 December 1948 Project Sign was reborn as Project Grudge, a re-branding that reflected a U-turn from belief to disbelief. The Grudge project's final report, completed in December 1949, was able to explain all but a small residue of UFO reports and concluded: 'when psychological and physiological factors are taken into consideration [we believe] that all these incidents can also be rationally explained.'Captain Ruppelt summed up Grudge's philosophy as being based upon 'the premise that UFOs couldn't exist. No matter what you see or hear, don't believe it.'

THE FLYING SAUCER WORKING PARTY

Flying saucers were regarded as largely an American phenomenon until 1950, when British newspapers began to take an interest in the growing mystery. During the spring and summer of that year a large number of sightings of mysterious fast-moving lights and objects in the sky were made by ordinary members of the public. Most of these observations were made after dark, but a few occurred during daylight. In April a woman from Chester reported seeing 'a round object, like a child's balloon magnified a hundred times, and very bright silver' flying against the wind.[17] Later in the year, disc- and globe-shaped objects were seen by many people in the West Country. In December a rugby match in Rhyl was halted as hundreds of spectators watched a 'flying tadpole' zoom across the sky trailing sparks.

Public fascination continued to grow and in the autumn of 1950 two Sunday newspapers serialised the first books on the subject of 'flying saucers'. The most influential of these was the bluntly titled The Flying Saucers Are Real, by a retired US Marine Corps Major, Donald Keyhoe, who appeared to have highly-placed sources in the American government. Keyhoe claimed the United States Air Force had privately concluded UFOs were of interplanetary origin

but feared if this was admitted a mass panic, similar to that which followed the Orson Wells radio broadcast of The War of the Worlds in 1938, would result.

Although Keyhoe's claims were never officially confirmed, his writings were popular and had a wide impact on the media and public opinion. His books and those of others who followed led a number of senior figures in the British military establishment to treat the subject seriously for the first time. At the forefront of these was Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, who began collecting accounts of sightings in 1950. Mountbatten was one of a small group of influential military officials who believed the saucers were real and of interplanetary origin. He encouraged his friend Charles Eade, editor of the Sunday Dispatch, to publish them without naming him as his source. In a letter to Eade of 26 March 1950 Mountbatten rejected the idea that flying saucers were secret weapons, boldly stating: 'The available evidence will show that they are not of human agency, that is to say they do not come from our Earth. If that is so then presumably they must come from some heavenly body, probably a planet… Maybe it is the Shackletons or Scotts of Venus or Mars who are making their first exploration of our Earth.'[18] Later that year, in a front-page story, Eade described flying saucers as 'the story that may be bigger than atom bomb wars' and referred to his source as 'one of the most famous men alive today… who commands universal respect and admiration'.[19]

Another influential establishment figure who took reports of UFOs seriously was the scientist Sir Henry Tizard. Best known for his work on the development of radar before the Second World War, his interest in flying saucers remained a secret until recently. Post-war, Tizard became Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence and, following a number of sightings in the summer of 1950, argued that 'reports of flying saucers should not be dismissed without some investigation'. It was as a direct result of his influence that the British government was persuaded to set up a small working party to investigate the mystery, reporting to the Directorate of Scientific Intelligence/Joint Technical Intelligence Committee (DSI/JTIC), part of the Ministry of Defence.

The Story That May Be Bigger Even Than Atom Bomb Wars

FLYING SAUCERS

Exclusive

Stillwell Tells His Own

Full Inquiry Into The No. 1 Sensation Of The Age

BY THE EDITOR OF THE SUNDAY DISPATCH

I HAVE decided to publish in the SUNDAY DISPATCH a series of the most sensational articles ever printed in any newspaper. The word "sensational" is much overworked, but I use it deliberately today because there is no other expression that can properly describe either the subject or the articles.

State May Pay First Child

By Sunday Dispatch Political Correspondent

THE Government are considering paying a family allowance for the first child.

By this means they hope to avoid a clash at the Socialist annual conference at Margate this week on wages and the high cost of living.

But Ministers would announce their plans only if the storm on the wage-freeze threatened to defeat the National Executive.

Page one headline from The Sunday Dispatch newspaper that launched a 'flying saucer'series in October 1950. Editor Charles Eade was encouraged to publish stories about saucer sightings by his friend, Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Mountbatten of Burma, who was Chief of Defence Staff from 1959. Initially a believer in UFOs, Mountbatten lost interest in 1962 when Lord Zuckerman, the MoD's Chief Scientist, assured him the evidence for UFOs was no more convincing than that for ghosts or the Loch Ness Monster.

The working party was created in August 1950. Chaired by G. L. Turney, head of scientific intelligence at the Admiralty, it included five intelligence officers, two of whom were scientists, the other three representing the intelligence branches of the Army, Navy and RAF. The aims and objectives of the team included a review of what was known about the subject, to liaise with the USAF Project Grudge and 'to examine from now on the evidence on which future reports of British origin of phenomena attributed to 'Flying Saucers' are based'.[20]

In June 1951, after 11 months of investigations, the working party produced its final report, DSI/JTIC Report No 7 Unidentified Flying Objects. The contents followed the lead taken by Project Grudge to debunk UFO sightings and concluded that flying saucers did not exist. Classified as 'Secret/Discreet', the team's brief six-page report poured cold water on the subject, maintaining that all UFO sightings could be explained as misidentifications of ordinary objects or natural phenomena, optical illusions, psychological delusions and hoaxes.

Of the possibilities reviewed by the Flying Saucer Working Party, the idea that UFOs were spacecraft piloted by interplanetary visitors was given short shrift: 'When the only material available is a mass of purely subjective evidence it is impossible to give anything like scientific proof that the phenomena observed are, or are not, caused by something entirely novel, such as aircraft of extraterrestrial origin, developed by beings unknown to us on lines more advanced than anything we have thought of.'[21]

The British team satisfied themselves that most of the sightings did not require such an elaborate hypothesis to explain them and 'could be accounted for much more simply'. In adopting this approach the team turned to what they described as 'a very old scientific principle usually attributed to William of Occam'. Occam's Razor states that the most probable hypothesis is the simplest necessary to explain a scientific problem such as that presented by the UFO mystery. In conclusion the report stated: 'We accordingly recommend very strongly that no further investigation of reported mysterious aerial phenomena be undertaken, unless and until some material evidence becomes available.'

A senior official from the CIA's Office of Scientific Intelligence, Dr Harris Marshall Chadwell, was present at the meeting in June 1951 when the report was delivered to the Ministry of Defence. The CIA had closely monitored the

United States Air Force investigations since 1948 and was concerned by the growing public fascination in the subject. As a result there was a level of official paranoia concerning news of intelligence interest in UFOs leaking to the media. The British team were informed by the CIA that 'in order to avoid undue stimulation of a subject that has already received too much public and professional interest', circulation of the British report should be restricted within the MoD and CIA.

The very existence of the MoD report remained a closely guarded secret for 50 years until I discovered a reference to the existence of the Working Party in the minutes of a meeting that were tucked away among the documents released by The National Archives in 1998. One (now declassified) surviving copy was then discovered in the MoD archives in 2001 and released by The National Archives in the following year. Attached was a covering letter from Directorate of Scientific Intelligence head Bertie Blount to Sir Henry Tizard, that read: 'This is the report on "Flying Saucers" for which you asked. I hope that it will serve its purpose.'[22]

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MINISTRY OF DEFENCE

DIRECTORATE OF
SCIENTIFIC INTELLIGENCE
AND
JOINT TECHNICAL INTELLIGENCE COMMITTEE

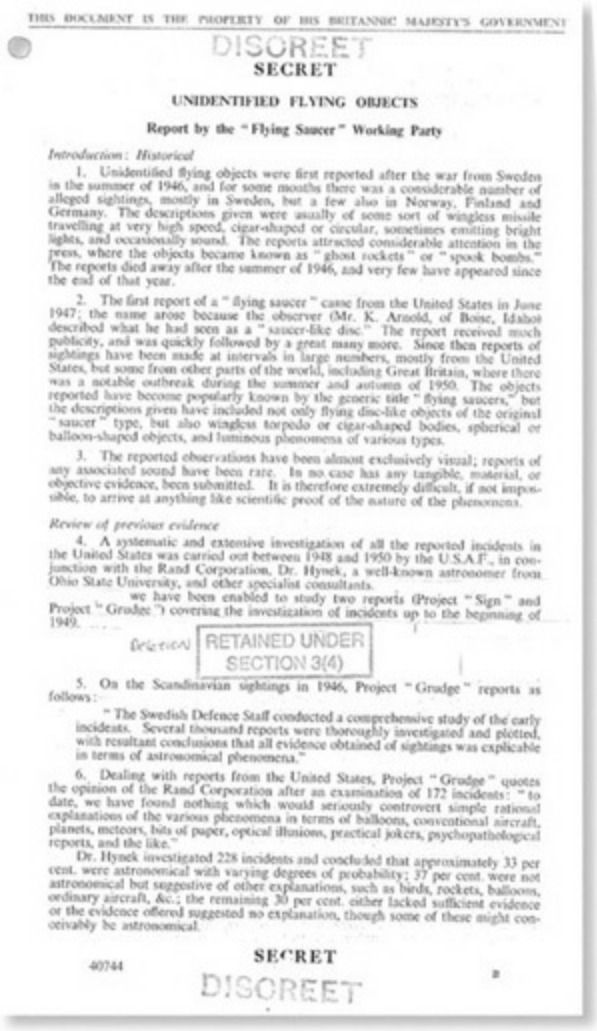
DEFE 44/119

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

June 1951

D.S.I./T.I.C. REPORT No. 7

SECRET
DISCREET



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UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

Report by the "Flying Saucer" Working Party

Introduction: Historical

1. Unidentified flying objects were first reported after the war from Sweden in the summer of 1946, and for some months there was a considerable number of alleged sightings, mostly in Sweden, but a few also in Norway, Finland and Germany. The descriptions given were usually of some sort of wingless missile travelling at very high speed, cigar-shaped or circular, sometimes emitting bright lights, and occasionally sound. The reports attracted considerable attention in the press, where the objects became known as "ghost rockets" or "spook bombs." The reports died away after the summer of 1946, and very few have appeared since the end of that year.

2. The first report of a "flying saucer" came from the United States in June 1947; the name arose because the observer (Mr. K. Arnold, of Boise, Idaho) described what he had seen as a "saucer-like disc." The report received much publicity, and was quickly followed by a great many more. Since then reports of sightings have been made at intervals in large numbers, mostly from the United States, but some from other parts of the world, including Great Britain, where there was a notable outbreak during the summer and autumn of 1950. The objects reported have become popularly known by the generic title "flying saucers," but the descriptions given have included not only flying disc-like objects of the original "saucer" type, but also wingless torpedo or cigar-shaped bodies, spherical or balloon-shaped objects, and luminous phenomena of various types.

3. The reported observations have been almost exclusively visual; reports of any associated sound have been rare. In no case has any tangible, material, or objective evidence, been submitted. It is therefore extremely difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at anything like scientific proof of the nature of the phenomena.

Review of previous evidence

4. A systematic and extensive investigation of all the reported incidents in the United States was carried out between 1948 and 1950 by the U.S.A.F., in conjunction with the Rand Corporation, Dr. Hynek, a well-known astronomer from Ohio State University, and other specialist consultants.

we have been enabled to study two reports (Project "Sign" and Project "Grudge") covering the investigation of incidents up to the beginning of 1949.

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5. On the Scandinavian sightings in 1946, Project "Grudge" reports as follows:

"The Swedish Defence Staff conducted a comprehensive study of the early incidents. Several thousand reports were thoroughly investigated and plotted, with resultant conclusions that all evidence obtained of sightings was explicable in terms of astronomical phenomena."

6. Dealing with reports from the United States, Project "Grudge" quotes the opinion of the Rand Corporation after an examination of 172 incidents: "to date, we have found nothing which would seriously controvert simple rational explanations of the various phenomena in terms of balloons, conventional aircraft, planets, meteors, bits of paper, optical illusions, practical jokers, psychopathological reports, and the like."

Dr. Hynek investigated 228 incidents and concluded that approximately 33 per cent. were astronomical with varying degrees of probability; 37 per cent. were not astronomical but suggestive of other explanations, such as birds, rockets, balloons, ordinary aircraft, &c.; the remaining 30 per cent. either lacked sufficient evidence or the evidence offered suggested no explanation, though some of these might conceivably be astronomical.

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The cover and first page of the MoD's report by the DSI/JTIC Flying Saucer Working Party, completed during the summer of 1951. The working party decided that UFOs did not exist and their conclusions were used to brief Prime Minister Winston Churchill in 1952. DEFE 44/119.

FLYING SAUCERS OVER FARNBOROUGH

This cryptic remark, and the CIA's influence upon the report's conclusions, could be taken to imply that a hidden agenda lurked behind the Flying Saucer Working Party's conclusions – and this is the opinion of one of the UFO witnesses whose incredible story features in the report. In 1950 Stan Hubbard was an experienced test pilot based at the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, site of one of the aeronautical industry's most important annual events, the September air show. On the morning of 15 August 1950, a dry, clear summer's day, Flight Lieutenant Hubbard was walking along the airfield runway towards his quarters. He later recalled his attention was attracted by what he described as 'a strange distant humming sound'. I had the chance to interview him in 2002 and he remembered then how, turning to investigate, he saw in the direction of Basingstoke an object that looked 'for all the world like the edge-on view of a discus, the sort of discus we used to throw at sports day in school… and it was rocking from side to side very slightly… but maintaining a very straight approach. That was something that has stuck in my mind very clearly, vividly, to this day.'[23]

As it approached the airfield, the sound emanating from the object increased in intensity to become 'a heavy, dominant humming with an associated subdued crackling-hissing… which reminded me strongly of the noise inside a large active electrical power station.' He continued: 'It was light grey in colour a bit like mother of pearl, but blurred. It was obviously reflecting light because as it rocked it looked like a pan lid as you rotate it, with segments of light rotating around. And I could see that around the edge as it went overhead, it was a different colour, it had a definite edge to it. And the whole of the edge was a mass of tiny crackling, sparkling lights. And associated with that, there was a real impact of a very strong ozone smell.

RAF test pilot Stan Hubbard, whose 1950 sighting triggered a secret investigation by the MoD.

‘There were no windows or portholes or any other characteristics at all. It was featureless, and the remarkable thing about it was there was no sound of air movement… as the object was coming closer and then went overhead I tried to estimate its size, altitude and speed, but with the absence of any readily identifiable feature it was difficult to gauge these factors with any confidence… I guessed that its height above ground when first seen was probably between 700 and 1000 [ft] and since it certainly seemed to maintain altitude throughout the period of my observation, I guessed that it would have to be about 100 ft in diameter. It must have been travelling very fast, perhaps as high as 500 to 900 mph.’

Hubbard immediately reported this sighting to his commanding officer and soon afterwards was quizzed by members of the Flying Saucer Working Party. He recalled the questions included: ‘“How high was it?” “How big was it?” “How fast was it?” “What was it?” And one question which I think reflects the tenor of the interview was: ‘“What do you suppose the object was, and where would it have come from?” I replied simply that in my opinion it was not something that had been designed and built on this Earth. Clearly, from the effect it had on the team, it was the wrong answer.’

The working party’s visit to Farnborough would not be the last. On the afternoon of 5 September 1950, just two weeks after Hubbard’s first observation, he saw what he believes was the same object again. On this occasion he was standing with five other serving RAF airmen on the watch-tower waiting for a display by the Hawker P.1081 when he spotted the object in the sky to the south of the airfield, towards Guildford. ‘I grabbed hold of the chap next to me,’ he recalled, ‘and said: “Hey, what do you think that is?” Pointing… and he shouted “My God! Go get a camera quick!, Go get some binoculars!”.’

Hubbard and his colleagues then watched an incredible performance of aerobatics by what the official report describes as ‘a flat disc, light pearl in colour [and] about the size of a shirt button’. Hubbard described it as: ‘fluttering, as though bordering on instability, in a hovering mode, the object would swoop off in a slight dive at incredibly high speed and in quite stable flight, then stop abruptly and go into another fluttering hover mode. This performance was repeated many times… and it appeared that all this was taking place some eight to ten miles south of us over the Farnham area.’

The UFO was under observation for around 10 minutes during which the

little crowd had swelled to more than a dozen RAF personnel. 'They were awestruck,' Hubbard recalls, 'but not one of them had a camera! I remember one of them saying "Sorry Stan, I didn't believe those first stories." It made my day.' Within 24 hours they were all questioned by the Flying Saucer Working Party. 'We were not given their names and we were strictly warned not to ask questions of them, nor make enquiries elsewhere in the Ministry', Hubbard said. 'We were also warned not to discuss the subject later, even amongst ourselves in private.'

Despite his misgivings Hubbard believed the assurance given by the Air Ministry member of the team that he 'had never had a more reliable and authentic sighting than ours'. He was unaware of the outcome of this investigation until I sent him a copy of the working party's final report after its release in 2001. In its summary of Hubbard's initial sighting the report said there was no doubt the experienced test pilot had honestly described what he had seen: 'but we find it impossible to believe that a most unconventional aircraft, of exceptional speed, could have travelled at no great altitude, in the middle of a fine summer morning, over a populous and air-minded district like Farnborough, without attracting the attention of more than one observer.'[24]

Accordingly, they concluded he was 'the victim of an optical illusion, or that he observed some quite normal type of aircraft and deceived himself about its shape and speed'. The report then turned its attention to the second incident, which they described as 'an interesting example of one report influencing another.' Although Hubbard believed the objects he saw on both occasions were identical, the authors felt this opinion was of little value. While they had no doubt a flying object of some sort had been seen: 'we again find it impossible to believe that an unconventional aircraft, manoeuvring for some time over a populous area, could have failed to attract the attention of other observers. We conclude that the officers in fact saw some quite normal aircraft, manoeuvring at extreme visual range, and were led by the previous report to believe it to be something abnormal.'[25]

The working party were satisfied this solution was correct because of another example of misperception reported to them by the Air Ministry member of their team, Wing Commander Myles Formby. Whilst on a rifle range near Portsmouth he spotted what he at first thought was a 'flying saucer' in the distance. 'Visibility was good, there being a cloudless sky and bright sunshine. The object was located and held by a telescope and gave the appearance of

being a circular shining disc moving on a regular flight path. It was only after observation had been kept for several minutes, and the altitude of the object changed so that it did not reflect the sunlight to the observer's eye, that it was identified as being a perfectly normal aircraft.'[26]

SCEPTICS AND BELIEVERS

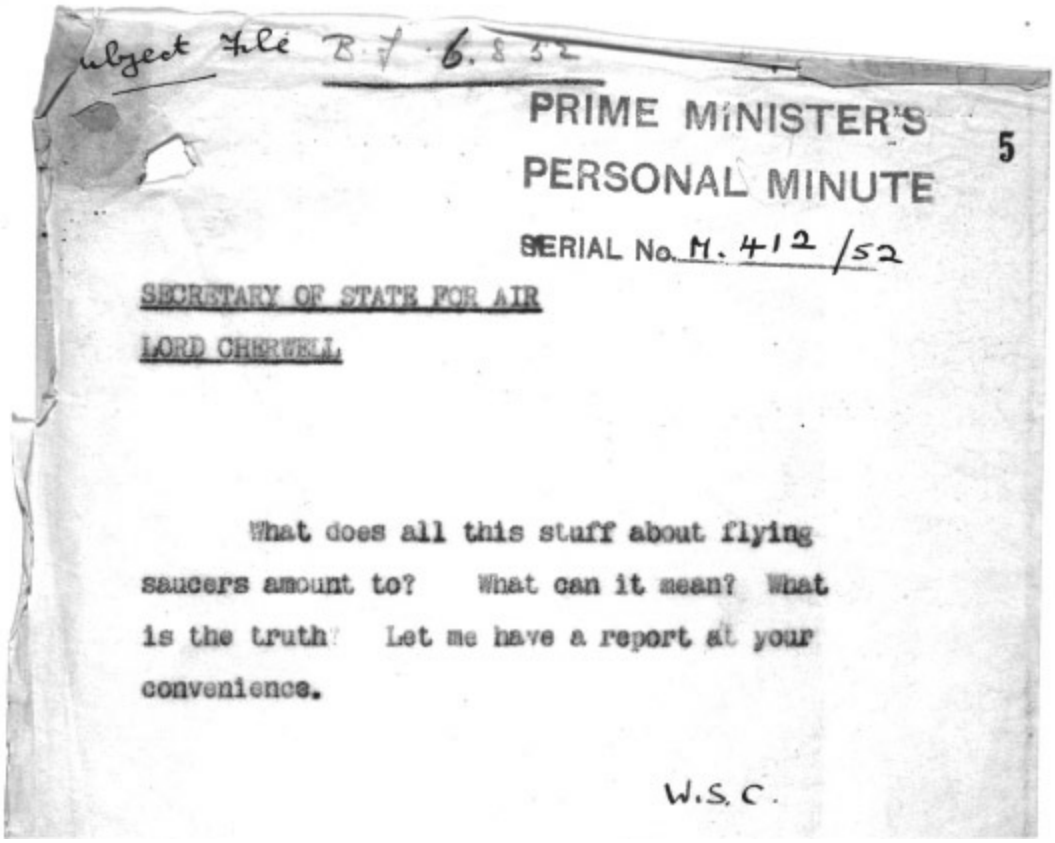
The conclusions of the Flying Saucer Working Party set the pattern for all future British government policy on UFOs. After the report was delivered, the team was dissolved and official investigations ended. However, during the summer of 1952 there was a new wave of sightings across the world. In the United States more than 500 sightings were reported to the US Air Force in July alone, leading future CIA deputy director Major General Charles P. Cabell to launch a new UFO project, Blue Book, under the control of the Air Technical Intelligence Center with Captain Ruppelt as its director.

For the Americans, the most alarming of these sightings occurred in the US capital, Washington DC. On 19 and 20 July 1952, strange moving blips appeared on radars at Washington's National Airport and at Andrews Air Force Base. The phenomena reappeared the following weekend, sometimes moving slowly, then reversing and moving off at incredible speed. Aircraft were scrambled but the crews saw nothing, despite being vectored towards targets that were visible on ground radar. At the same time, civilian aircrew and ground controllers reported seeing strange lights whilst the phenomena were visible on radar. These events alarmed the Truman administration and led the New York Times to demand why 'a jet fighter of Air Defence Command, capable of a speed of 600 miles an hour, failed to catch one of the "objects"'.[27]

A huge press conference was called at the Pentagon as officials moved to calm public fears. High-ranking figures, including the director of United States Air Force intelligence, Major General John Samford, reassured the assembled media the radar blips were probably the result of temperature inversions created by the hot summer weather. These types of unusual conditions, he said, could produce false echoes on radar screens.

Samford's public reassurances followed those given to authority figures in private: President Harry Truman himself had been sufficiently concerned to phone Captain Ruppelt asking for an explanation. And Truman was not the only national leader who read the newspaper headlines. On 28 July, the day before

the Washington press conference, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had sent a memo to his Secretary of State for Air and copied it to Lord Cherwell, one of his most trusted scientific advisers. This demanded: 'What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience.'[28]



Subject file B/6.852

PRIME MINISTER'S
PERSONAL MINUTE

5

SERIAL No. M. 412/52

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR AIR

LORD CHERWELL

What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to? What can it mean? What is the truth? Let me have a report at your convenience.

W.S.C.

Following a 'flap' of UFO sightings over Washington DC, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill asked the Secretary of State for Air: 'What does all this stuff about flying saucers amount to?' PREM 11/855

The Prime Minister received a reassuring response from the Air Ministry on 9 August 1952. Preserved alongside Churchill's memo at The National Archives, it said UFOs were the subject of 'a full intelligence study in 1951' that had concluded all incidents reported could be explained by natural phenomena, misperceptions of aircraft, balloons and birds, optical illusions, psychological delusions and deliberate hoaxes. Churchill was told that an earlier investigation, carried out by the USAF's Project Grudge in 1948–9 had reached a similar conclusion and that 'nothing has happened since 1951 to make the Air Staff change their opinion, and, to judge from recent Press statements, the same is true in America.'

The government's Chief Scientist, Lord Cherwell (Frederick Lindemann) said he 'agreed entirely' with the Air Ministry and, in a minute circulated to Cabinet members, dismissed the American saucer scare as 'a product of mass psychology'. But not everyone was so convinced. On 12 August Churchill's son-in-law, Duncan Sandys, then Minister of Supply, said he was unable to accept the Chief Scientist's view without further investigation of the reports. He added: 'There may, as you say, be no real evidence of the existence of flying saucer aircraft, but there is in my view ample evidence of some unfamiliar and unexplained phenomenon.'[29]

The division in the establishment between those who 'believed' that reports of flying saucers should be taken seriously, such as Duncan Sandys and Lord Mountbatten, and those who dismissed the whole subject as 'mass hysteria' was growing (see below). The sceptics tended to be scientists, who applied cold logic to the UFO question and demanded solid evidence, and their opinion was ultimately the most influential.

'Saucer Sam'

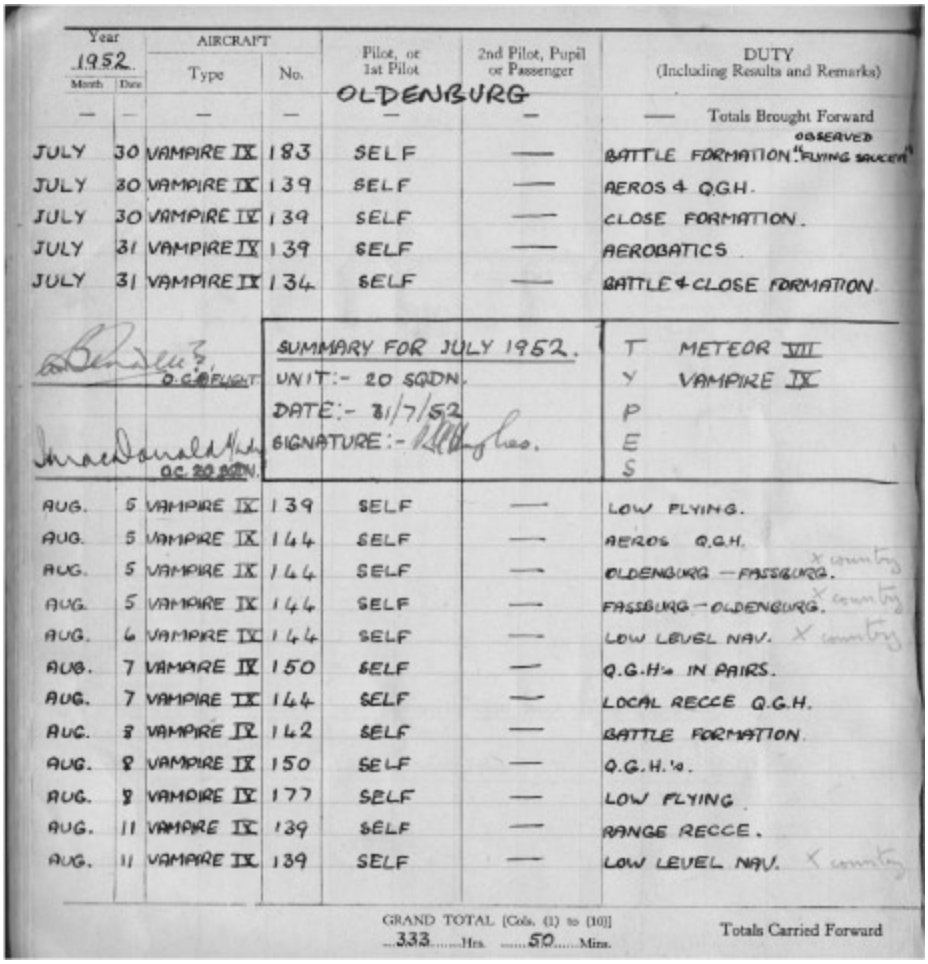
During the 1950s the debate between believers and sceptics over the existence of flying saucers raged in the highest levels of the military, the government and even the Royal Family. Among the key 'believers' were Louis Mountbatten and his cousin Prince Philip, whose equerry, Sir Peter Horsley, was given carte blanche to collect accounts of sightings by RAF aircrew for royal scrutiny. But whilst Mountbatten preferred to keep his personal interest secret, in 1954 the spiritualist Air Chief Marshal Hugh Dowding, of Battle of Britain fame, publicly proclaimed his faith in the existence of flying saucers in the pages of a

Sunday newspaper. Within government, Prime Minister Winston Churchill's son-in-law and future Minister of Defence, Duncan Sandys, said he believed some of the 'evidence'. Sandys took a pragmatic view, insisting the evidence for flying saucers was no different to the first reports of the German V-2 rockets during 1943, which 'all our leading scientists declared to be technically impossible'. In 1952 he clashed with the British government's Chief Scientist, Lord Cherwell, who believed all UFO sightings could be explained.' (see p. 42). The exchange followed Sandys' tour of the 2nd Tactical Air Force in Germany where he heard a RAF pilot had reported seeing a UFO whilst on a training exercise.

On 30 July 1952, just two days after Churchill drafted his famous minute on 'flying saucers'(see p. 43), a RAF Vampire flown by 22-year-old Sgt Roland Hughes was intercepted by a mysterious flying object high above Germany. Hughes was looking upwards through his canopy as the formation of four aircraft from 20 Squadron turned to return to base when he caught sight of a 'flash of silver light' high above them. Within seconds the light appeared to race downwards towards him until it resolved into a 'flying disc' hanging stationary in the sky. It appeared to be at least 100 ft in diameter – about the wingspan of a wartime Lancaster bomber. Decades later he told his son Brian how, 'looking at it in sheer amazement from below he could clearly make out, with astonishing clarity, the disc's highly reflective and absolutely seamless metallic-looking surface.' Then, as quickly as it appeared, it accelerated upwards and vanished. The young pilot was so dumbfounded he did not make a report about his sighting until the formation landed at RAF Oldenburg. Then he discovered none of the other three pilots had seen anything unusual. But his sighting was taken so seriously that on 5 August he was ordered to fly to RAF Fassberg where he was to report to a senior officer. On arrival in the officer's mess he was amazed to find a visiting government minister, Duncan Sandys, was waiting to hear his story. After hearing Sgt Hughes's account, Sandys asked: 'How many beers had you had the night before?'. At which point the Air Officer Commanding interjected: 'No, they picked it up on radar – travelling at speeds far in excess of any known aircraft.' This was the first Sgt Hughes knew about the flying saucer being observed by ground radar. It was immediately obvious that some form of investigation had been carried out behind the scenes that had uncovered supporting evidence. After the incident a member of the ground crew obtained permission to paint a picture of a 'flying saucer' on the fuselage of the Vampire flown by Sgt Hughes on that fateful day

(see p. 46). As his nickname in the RAF was ‘Sam’ the words ‘Saucer Sam’ were painted in inverted commas underneath a sketch of a tea saucer sporting two little wings. The UFO experience stayed with Sgt Hughes for the rest of his life, but he could never understand why his three colleagues failed to see the flying saucer. Before he died in 2009, at the age of 79, he confided in his son that he wondered ‘if it had some means of stopping the others from seeing it and only allowed me to see it’.[1]

In official papers Duncan Sandys implied that his interview with Sgt Hughes turned him from a sceptic into a believer in flying saucers. Responding to the sceptical Lord Cherwell, he said he had no doubt Sgt Hughes ‘saw a phenomenon similar to that described by numerous observers in the United States’.[2]



Year 1952 Month	Date	AIRCRAFT Type	No.	Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	DUTY (Including Results and Remarks)
—	—	—	—	OLDENBURG —	—	— Totals Brought Forward
JULY	30	VAMPIRE IX	183	SELF	—	BATTLE FORMATION. OBSERVED "FLYING SAUCER"
JULY	30	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	AEROS & Q.G.H.
JULY	30	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	CLOSE FORMATION.
JULY	31	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	AEROBATICS.
JULY	31	VAMPIRE IX	134	SELF	—	BATTLE & CLOSE FORMATION.
				SUMMARY FOR JULY 1952.		T METEOR VII
				UNIT:- 20 SQDN.		Y VAMPIRE IX
				DATE:- 31/7/52		P
				SIGNATURE:-		E
						S
AUG.	5	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	LOW FLYING.
AUG.	5	VAMPIRE IX	144	SELF	—	AEROS Q.G.H.
AUG.	5	VAMPIRE IX	144	SELF	—	OLDENBURG — FASSBURG.
AUG.	5	VAMPIRE IX	144	SELF	—	FASSBURG — OLDENBURG.
AUG.	6	VAMPIRE IX	144	SELF	—	LOW LEVEL NAV.
AUG.	7	VAMPIRE IX	150	SELF	—	Q.G.H's IN PAIRS.
AUG.	7	VAMPIRE IX	144	SELF	—	LOCAL RECCE Q.G.H.
AUG.	8	VAMPIRE IX	142	SELF	—	BATTLE FORMATION.
AUG.	8	VAMPIRE IX	150	SELF	—	Q.G.H.'s.
AUG.	8	VAMPIRE IX	177	SELF	—	LOW FLYING.
AUG.	11	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	RANGE RECCE.
AUG.	11	VAMPIRE IX	139	SELF	—	LOW LEVEL NAV.

GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (10)] 333 Hrs. 50 Mins. — Totals Carried Forward

A page from the flying logbook of RAF Vampire pilot Sgt Roland Hughes recording his sighting of a 'flying saucer' over Germany in 1952 and his subsequent meeting with a government minister, Duncan Sandys.

A photograph showing Sgt Hughes – whose RAF nickname was Sam – beside the RAF Vampire that was painted with a cartoon showing a UFO and the words ‘Saucer Sam’.

THE TOPCLIFFE INCIDENT

With the debate ongoing, events were to take another unexpected turn when a fresh series of sightings occurred during a major NATO exercise in Europe, Operation Mainbrace. The most dramatic was reported by a group of Shackleton aircrew who saw a circular silver object above the airfield at RAF Topcliffe, North Yorkshire, on the afternoon of 19 September 1952. A report made to Topcliffe's commanding officer by one of the men, Flight Lieutenant John Kilburn of 269 Squadron, can be found among the Fighter Command papers preserved at The National Archives. In this, Kilburn said he was standing on the airfield with four other Shackleton aircrew watching a Meteor fighter descending: 'The Meteor was at approximately 5,000 feet and approaching from the east. Flt Lt Paris suddenly noticed a white object in the sky at a height between ten and twenty thousand feet some five miles astern of the Meteor. The object was silver in colour and circular in shape, it appeared to be travelling at a much slower speed than the Meteor but was on a similar course. It maintained the slow forward speed for a few seconds before commencing to descend, swinging in a pendular motion during descent similar to a falling sycamore leaf. This was at first thought to be a parachute or engine cowling. The Meteor, meanwhile, turned towards Dishforth and the object, while continuing its descent, appeared to follow suit. After a further few seconds, the object stopped its pendulous motion and its descent, and began to rotate on its own axis. Suddenly it accelerated at an incredible speed towards the west turning onto a south easterly heading before disappearing. All this occurred in a matter of fifteen to twenty seconds. The acceleration was in excess of that of a shooting star. I have never seen such a phenomenon before. The movements of the object were not identifiable with anything I have seen in the air and the rate of acceleration was unbelievable.'[30]

As in America, the year 1952 was to be a busy one for UFOs and the Topcliffe incident was just the first in a series of reports made by military personnel that reached the Air Ministry. There were also a growing number of incidents involving the tracking of fast-moving unidentified objects on RAF radars. For example, on 21 October 1952 a flying instructor and his Royal Navy student were in a Meteor jet on exercise from the RAF's central flying school at Little Rissington, Gloucestershire, when they saw three saucer-

shaped UFOs. Flight Lieutenant Michael Swiney, who later served in air intelligence and retired at the rank of Air Commodore, vividly remembers this encounter. The circular plate-like objects were also clearly observed by his student, Lieutenant David Crofts. They became visible when the Meteor punched through a layer of cloud at around 12,000 ft. Initially Swiney thought they were three parachutes descending towards them. Crofts described them as elliptical in shape and iridescent, like circular pieces of glass reflecting the sun.

Shaken, Swiney abandoned the training flight and reported the sighting to ground control. The objects, stationary at first, appeared to change position and then vanished. Subsequently he learned that aircraft were scrambled by Fighter Command to intercept these UFOs. When I interviewed Michael Swiney in 2004 he recalled his reaction: 'I was frightened, I make no bones about it. It was something supernatural, perhaps, and when I landed someone told me I looked as if I had seen a ghost. I immediately thought of saucers, because that was actually what they looked like… I even put an entry in my logbook, which reads: "saucers!… 3 'flying saucers' sighted at height, confirmed by GCI [radar]".[31]

TOPCLIFFE AIRMEN SIGHT A "FLYING SAUCER"

"Incredible Speed"

THE captain of a Coastal Command Shackleton aircraft at R.A.F. Station, Topcliffe, to-day told an "Evening Press" reporter about the "flying saucer" which he saw while he was standing near a hangar on the station.

He is Flight Lieutenant John William Kilburn (31), of Thornhill, Cumber-

Flu? Grin And Bear It

A COMMITTEE of the

12 Months For Crystal-Gazer

A CLAIRVOYANT, John D'Arcy (30), was sentenced to

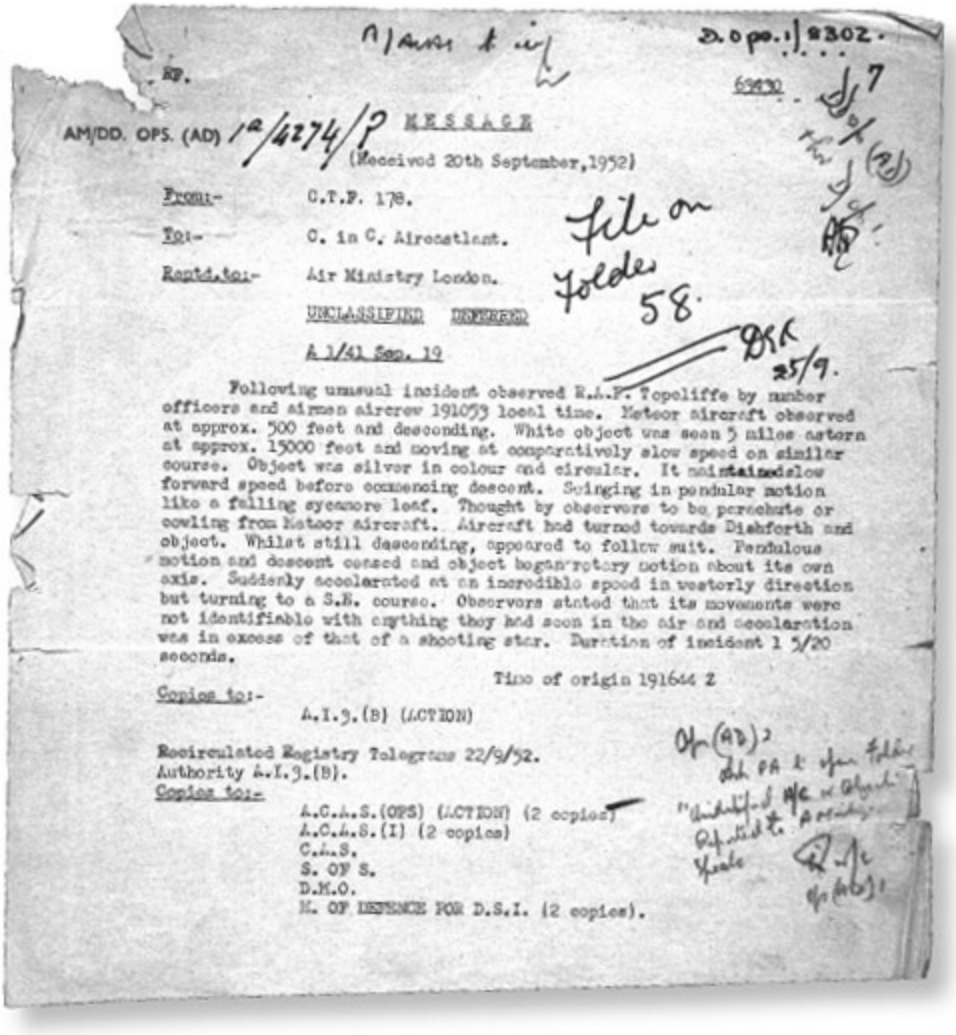
Quarter Sessions, and Ray Michael (31), a writer, to six

a widow, who, it was stated,

was told during a crystal-

CAR OUTPUT, EXPORTS

A sighting of a ‘flying saucer’ by RAF Shackleton aircrew in Yorkshire during a NATO exercise made news headlines in September 1952.



RP.

AM/DD. OPS. (AD) 12/4274/P MESSAGE

(Received 20th September, 1952)

From:- C.T.P. 178.

To:- C. in C. Aircoatlant.

Reptd.to:- Air Ministry London.

UNCLASSIFIED DEFERRED

A.1/41 Sep. 19

Following unusual incident observed R.A.F. Topcliffe by number officers and airmen aircrew 191059 local time. Meteor aircraft observed at approx. 500 feet and descending. White object was seen 5 miles astern at approx. 15000 feet and moving at comparatively slow speed on similar course. Object was silver in colour and circular. It maintained slow forward speed before commencing descent. Swinging in pendular motion like a falling sycamore leaf. Thought by observers to be parachute or cowling from Meteor aircraft. Aircraft had turned towards Dishforth and object. Whilst still descending, appeared to follow suit. Pendulous motion and descent ceased and object began rotary motion about its own axis. Suddenly accelerated at an incredible speed in westerly direction but turning to a S.E. course. Observers stated that its movements were not identifiable with anything they had seen in the air and acceleration was in excess of that of a shooting star. Duration of incident 1 5/20 seconds.

Time of origin 191644 Z

Copies to:-

A.I.3.(B) (ACTION)

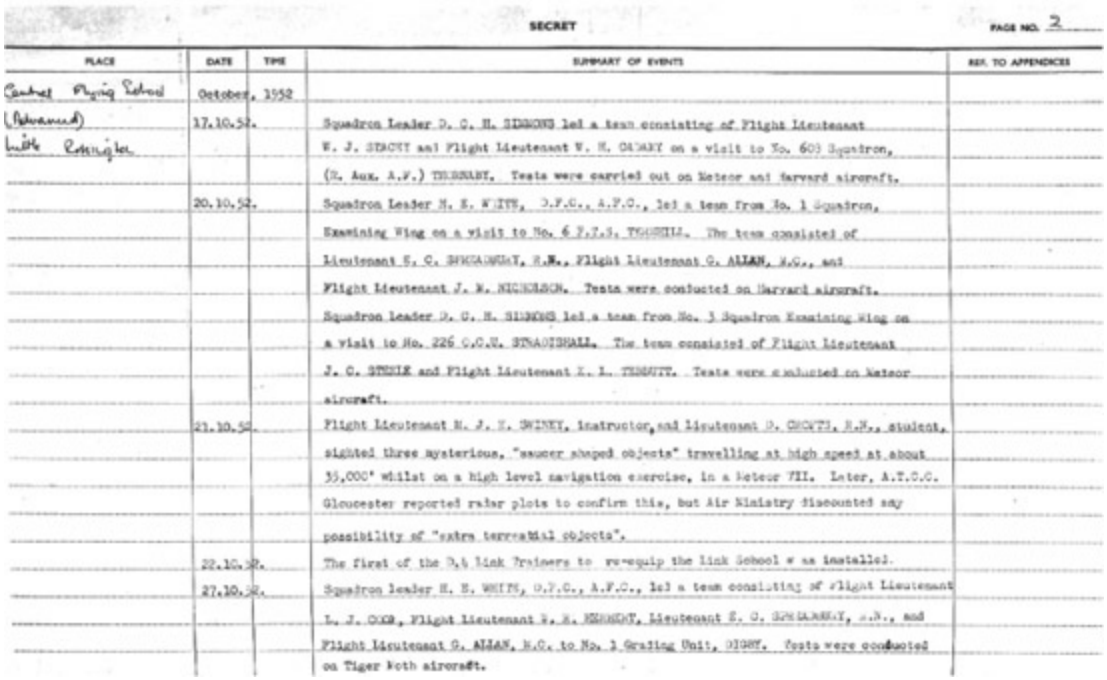
Recirculated Registry Telegram 22/9/52.
Authority A.I.3.(B).
Copies to:-

A.C.A.S.(OPS) (ACTION) (2 copies)
A.C.A.S.(I) (2 copies)
C.A.S.
S. OF S.
D.M.O.
M. OF DEFENCE FOR D.S.I. (2 copies).

Details of the Topcliffe incident were circulated to Air Ministry intelligence in this message dated 20 September 1952. AIR 20 /7390

On landing at Little Rissington, the two men were ordered to remain in their quarters until the following day, when an Air Ministry team arrived to interview them. The team took statements and asked the men to draw what they had seen. Lieutenant Crofts recalls he was told 'they [Air Intelligence] had been in communication with every country in the world that was likely to have that sort of aircraft in the vicinity and drew a blank'. When I interviewed David Crofts in 2004 he remembered: 'They also said they [the UFOs] had been picked up on radar; fighters had been scrambled and the target had a ground speed of 600 knots, heading east but the fighters saw nothing, didn't make a contact and returned to base.'[32]

Despite this clear testimony it appears the men's statements describing this dramatic incident were subsequently destroyed. On his retirement, Air Commodore Swiney made inquiries with the MoD hoping to locate a copy of his original report on the incident. He was amazed to learn that most records of UFOs before 1962 had been routinely shredded. Today all that remains in the files at The National Archives is a single surviving reference in the flying school's operations record book which simply records how the two men 'sighted three mysterious "saucer-shaped objects" travelling at high speed at about 35,000 feet whilst on a high level navigation exercise'. The document adds that air traffic control later reported radar plots that appeared to confirm their report 'but Air Ministry discounted any possibility of "extraterrestrial objects".'[33]



SECRET

PAGE NO. 2

PLACE	DATE	TIME	SUMMARY OF EVENTS	REF. TO APPENDICES
Central Flying School (Advanced) Little Rissington	October, 1952			
	17.10.52.		Squadron Leader D. G. H. SIDDONS led a team consisting of Flight Lieutenant W. J. STACEY and Flight Lieutenant W. H. CASEY on a visit to No. 603 Squadron, (R. Aux. A.F.) TURNHOUSE. Tests were carried out on Meteor and Harvard aircraft.	
	20.10.52.		Squadron Leader M. E. WHITE, D.F.C., A.F.C., led a team from No. 1 Squadron, Examining Wing on a visit to No. 6 F.T.S. TYCROFTS. The team consisted of Lieutenant E. C. SHOLARSKY, R.N., Flight Lieutenant G. ALLAN, R.C., and Flight Lieutenant J. M. NICHOLSON. Tests were conducted on Harvard aircraft.	
			Squadron Leader D. G. H. SIDDONS led a team from No. 1 Squadron Examining Wing on a visit to No. 226 O.C.U. STRADISHALL. The team consisted of Flight Lieutenant J. C. STEELE and Flight Lieutenant K. L. TURNUTT. Tests were conducted on Meteor aircraft.	
	21.10.52.		Flight Lieutenant N. J. H. SWINEY, Instructor, and Lieutenant D. CROFTS, R.N., student, sighted three mysterious, "saucer shaped objects" travelling at high speed at about 35,000' whilst on a high level navigation exercise, in a Meteor VII. Later, A.T.C.C. Gloucester reported radar plots to confirm this, but Air Ministry discounted any possibility of "extra terrestrial objects".	
	22.10.52.		The first of the 3,4 link Trainers to re-equip the link School was installed.	
	27.10.52.		Squadron Leader M. E. WHITE, D.F.C., A.F.C., led a team consisting of Flight Lieutenant L. J. COX, Flight Lieutenant R. H. HERBERT, Lieutenant E. C. SCHLARSKY, R.N., and Flight Lieutenant G. ALLAN, R.C. to No. 1 Grading Unit, DIGBY. Tests were conducted on Tiger Moth aircraft.	

An extract from the Operations Record Book of RAF Little Rissington that includes a sighting of ‘three mysterious saucer shaped objects’ by the crew of a RAF Meteor jet on 21 October 1952. AIR 29/2310

Writing in 1988 Ralph Noyes, who was private secretary to the Vice Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Ralph Cochrane, at the time recalled their 'own embarrassed unease, widely shared by the [RAF] operations staff, that "our own people" had begun to fall for "that saucer nonsense"'.[34] Indeed, as a direct result of these incidents a decision was taken in 1953 that the Air Ministry should investigate UFO reports on a permanent basis and responsibility for this was delegated by the Chief of the Air Staff to a section of the air technical intelligence branch, DDI (Tech). The memoirs of Captain Edward Ruppelt refer to an exchange visit to Project Blue Book's base at Wright-Patterson airfield, Ohio, by two RAF officers shortly afterwards. In his Report on Unidentified Flying Objects, published in 1956, Ruppelt revealed the officers were in the US 'on a classified mission' during which one admitted the sightings during Operation Mainbrace had 'caused the RAF to officially recognise the UFO'.

FROM ANGELS TO ALIENS

One of the features of the UFO phenomenon that most concerned the Air Ministry was visual sightings that appeared to be corroborated by radar operators, as featured in the report by Michael Swiney and David Crofts. Unexplained phenomena had been tracked on RAF radars early in the Second World War (see p. 23) and again during the 'ghost plane' flap of 1947 (see p. 30), but until 1952 none of these had involved visual sightings.

In his history of UK air defence radar systems, Watching the Skies, Jack Gough says that 'angel' and 'ghost' echoes continued to plague RAF radars during the early 1950s. These sometimes appeared on ground radar 'as a cloud of responses very similar to the echoes obtained by small aircraft'. When tracked as individual echoes, they could easily be mistaken for military aircraft as they followed a steady course and were plotted at heights from 2 ft to 10,000 ft.[35]

The Air Ministry turned to their scientists to provide a solution to this problem. Initially there were two competing theories to explain 'angels'. The first was they were caused by unusual conditions in the atmosphere that created pockets of air that bent and reflected radar beams to produce false targets. This appeared likely, but could not explain how some 'angels' moved against the prevailing winds or travelled faster than measured wind speeds.

The second improbable-seeming theory was that angels were really formations of birds flying to and from their breeding grounds as part of their annual migrations. At the time, the few ornithologists who were using radar to study bird movements had problems persuading the RAF to take this theory seriously. However, during the war, staff at coastal radar stations had linked 'angels' on their screens with flights of seabirds tracked with the naked eye. On rare occasions large individual birds had been known to cause chaos. Barry Huddart, who served with Fighter Command HQ in 1957, recalled one incident 'when fighters were scrambled to intercept an echo on a radar screen which turned out to be a Golden Eagle at 25,000 ft in a jet stream, very unusual but nonetheless true'.[36]

By 1957 Fighter Command HQ was so concerned by the 'angel' problem that it ordered a secret investigation by its Research Branch. The two-year study was to combine the skills of its radar technicians with the expertise of British ornithologists. Selected RAF radar stations around the east coast were asked to send film from their radar cameras for analysis. Meanwhile, morbid experiments were carried out to measure the echoing area of various types of birds. Dead animals were obtained from bird sanctuaries, their bodies were wrapped in cellophane and then spun whilst radar was bounced off them to measure their 'echoing area'.

The investigation was concentrated around one key radar station where 'angels' had been frequently reported. RAF Trimingham, on the north Norfolk coast, was one of the first to be equipped with a new powerful radar, the Type 80. Ornithologist David Lack used this to track 'angel' echoes for a year. His study revealed the heaviest 'angel' activity occurred during the spring and autumn months, usually at night in calm weather when birds were migrating over the sea at heights from 2,000 ft to 4,000 ft. Lack and his colleagues were able to demonstrate that what the radar operators were actually seeing were flocks of small birds migrating to and from East Anglia and Continental Europe. These observations led the RAF inquiry to conclude in 1958 that most 'angel' echoes on radar were caused by birds after all.[37]

Nevertheless, a big problem remained. How could 'angels' be eliminated from radar without playing havoc with the tracking and control of military aircraft? The answer was a gadget that simply tuned out the 'noise' created by the presence of smaller birds and other clutter from radar screens whilst at the same increasing the strength and visibility of echoes created by aircraft. This

system was simplified further when all ‘friendly’ aircraft were fitted with transponders that transmit a coded identification signal to ground stations.

Advances in radar technology may explain why the majority of accounts describing UFOs on radar were made during the 1940s and 1950s, before technological innovations removed the noise that plagued older systems. The older post-war radars appear to have been more effective detectors of a range of natural and unusual phenomena including ‘angels’ and some UFOs. Once computers were used to remove anything that did not behave like an aircraft from screens, reports of UFOs on radar became rarer. This was brought home to me during a visit to a busy RAF radar control centre in 2005. When I asked one of the operators if they ever detected UFOs she replied, with a smile: ‘Sometimes, but when we spot one we just send for the technicians who come along and tune them out.’

UFOS AT RAF WEST FREUGH

Nonetheless, the main purpose of air defence radars is to detect unidentified aircraft that might pose a threat to the security of the UK. On rare occasions, some radar UFOs defied all attempts to explain them as ‘angels’ or other naturally occurring phenomena. One of the best examples took place on 4 April 1957 when a formation of UFOs was tracked over the Irish Sea. Unlike other similar incidents that were kept secret, the radar operators in this case were civilians and the story appeared in the national media. Newspapers discovered the objects had been seen on radar at a record-breaking 70,000 ft, far beyond the capability of most aircraft of the day. This led to speculation these UFOs could have been long-range Russian or American spy planes. The incident caused a major panic within the Air Ministry and led to questions in Parliament and at the Joint Intelligence Committee.

Wing Commander Peter Whitworth, who was commanding officer of RAF West Freugh in 1957, sent the following detailed account of this incident to the MoD in 1971 after he was approached by a UFO researcher. He asked the MoD for permission to release details, which even then were protected by the Official Secrets Act, writing: ‘The radars used at West Freugh were extremely accurate and reliable. They were used for “blind-bombing” if weather conditions were too bad for the bomb-aimer to see the target in Luce Bay. The plotting of the UFO was thus a true and accurate plot, confirmed by two radar operators, 14 miles apart. At the time of the sighting, there was unbroken cloud

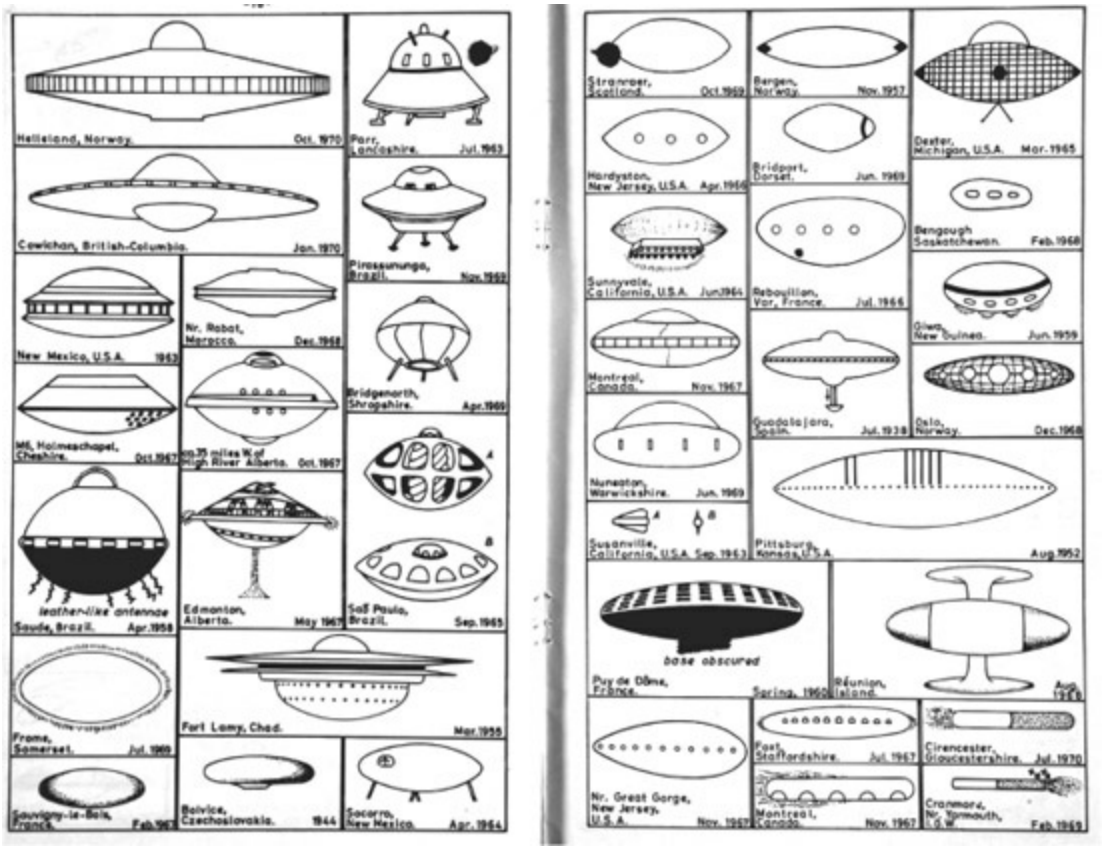
at approximately 1,000 ft over the whole area. The UFO was not seen or heard… [it] was first seen when the radar at Balscalloch, near Corsewall Point, north of Stranraer, "locked on" to the object. This showed the UFO to be over the sea, about 20–25 miles N-West of Stranraer; it was at approx 51,000 ft and absolutely stationary in space. This so surprised the radar operator, he called up the other operator at Ardwell (14 miles away) and asked if he had anything on his screen. The Ardwell operator switched-on his set and at once the radar picked up the UFO. Both operators then tracked the UFO until it disappeared from their screens, approx four minutes later.

'After remaining stationary for a short time, the UFO began to rise vertically, with no forward movement, rising rapidly to approx 60,000 ft in much less than a minute. The UFO then began to move in an Easterly direction, slowly at first but later accelerating very fast and travelling towards Newton Stewart, losing height on the way. Near Newton Stewart the UFO made a very sharp turn to the South-West, still at very high speed and losing height approx 15,000 ft, it continued on the S-West course towards the Isle of Man, when radar contact was lost… the sharp turn made near Newton Stewart would be impossible for any aircraft travelling at similar speed, according to one of the radar operators.'[38]

This letter survives at The National Archives alongside a detailed air intelligence report covering the investigation of this incident. The report confirms most of the details in Whitworth's account written 15 years after the event. It says that five objects were detected by three radars at least one of which rose to an altitude of 70,000 ft where it remained, while at other times the formation moved as speeds of around 240 mph. Shortly before the objects disappeared, the operators saw up to four smaller objects moving in line astern about 4,000 yds from each other.

The report notes how 'the radar operators [said] the sizes of the echoes were considerably larger than would be expected from normal aircraft. In fact they considered that the size was nearer that of a ship's echo'. It adds that nothing could be said of physical construction of these UFOs 'except they were very effective reflectors of radar signals, and that they must have been either of considerable size or else constructed to be especially good reflectors'. Inquiries ruled out aircraft, meteorological balloons and thunderclouds as explanations and the report concluded with a startling statement that is the closest the Air Ministry ever came to an admission that UFOs did exist: 'It is

concluded that the incident was due to the presence of five reflecting objects of unidentified type and origin.'[39]


Helleland, Norway. Oct. 1970
Parr, Lancashire. Jul. 1963
Cowichan, British-Columbia. Jan. 1970
Pirassununga, Brazil. Nov. 1952
New Mexico, U.S.A. 1963
Nr. Rabat, Morocco. Dec. 1968
Bridgenorth, Shropshire. Apr. 1969
Mt. Holmeschapel, Cheshire. Oct. 1967
Edmonton, Alberta. May 1967
Saõ Paulo, Brazil. Sep. 1965
leather-like antennae
Saude, Brazil. Apr. 1958
Frome, Somerset. Jul. 1969
Fort Lamy, Chad. Mar. 1955
Bolvice, Czechoslovakia. 1844
Socorro, New Mexico. Apr. 1964
Stranraer, Scotland. Oct. 1969
Bergen, Norway. Nov. 1957
Dexter, Michigan, U.S.A. Mar. 1965
Hardyston, New Jersey, U.S.A. Apr. 1966
Bridport, Dorset. Jun. 1969
Bengough Saskatchewan. Feb. 1968
Sunnyvale, California, U.S.A. Jun. 1964
Rebouillon, Var, France. Jul. 1966
Montreal, Canada. Nov. 1967
Guadalajara, Spain. Jul. 1938
Oslo, Norway. Dec. 1968
Nuneaton, Warwickshire. Jun. 1969
Susanville, California, U.S.A. Sep. 1963
Pittsburg, Kansas, U.S.A. Aug. 1952
base obscured
Puy de Dôme, France. Spring, 1960
Réunion Island. Aug. 1954
Cirencester, Gloucestershire. Jul. 1970
Nr. Great Gorge, New Jersey, U.S.A. Nov. 1967
Montreal, Canada. Nov. 1967
Cranmore, Nr. Yarmouth, I.O.W. Feb. 1965

No two UFOs are identical. In the years that followed the first flying saucer sightings, reports of many different sized and shaped UFOs were made, as demonstrated by this 1971 spread from The UFO Register, a magazine produced by Contact UK. 77 different types of UFO were depicted. AIR 20/19086

After the story appeared in the press, the Air Ministry were questioned about UFOs at a meeting of the Joint Intelligence Committee at the Cabinet Office. In response to their concerns, Air Vice Marshal Bill McDonald reassured the committee that 'all of these phenomena have… been satisfactorily explained through mistakes in radar interpretation, maladjustment of sets, as balloons or even as aircraft'.[40] Plainly this was not the case as the West Freugh incident was one of a number that remained listed as 'unexplained' in air intelligence files.

The Cold War was now at its height and UFOs remained a persistent and troubling problem for the air forces of the world. Ralph Noyes, who served as private secretary to the Vice Chief of Air Staff and later rose to the rank of Assistant Under Secretary of State for Defence, admitted to me in a 1989 interview that West Freugh and other incidents left the Air Staff in 'little doubt something had taken place for which we had no explanation'.[41] He added: 'Not once, however, was there the faintest suggestion that extraterrestrials might be in question. We suspected the Russians. We suspected faulty radar. We wondered whether RAF personnel might be succumbing to hallucinogens. But we found no evidence of any such things and in the end, and fairly swiftly, we simply forgot these uncomfortable "intrusions".'

CHAPTER 3
Cold War UFOs

Prior to 1950 flying saucers were widely seen as an American phenomenon, but within just four years people across Britain were seeing them – and believing in them. At this early stage British sightings lacked a little drama in comparison with those that were being reported in America. Even so there were some fascinating accounts from eye-witnesses, such as this incident reported by Flight Lieutenant James Salandin, who was a pilot flying with the RAF's auxiliary air force:

'On 10 October 1954 I took off from North Weald on a normal routine flight in a Meteor 8 aircraft. Whilst climbing I noticed a number of trails in the Chatham/Gillingham area at 12 o'clock… When at 15,000 feet I saw what I presumed at the time to be two aeroplanes flying on a reciprocal course to myself but out to my port side… I could not identify these two objects as aeroplanes and I could not follow them due to the fantastic speed at which they were travelling. The first one appeared to be a goldy colour and the second silvery, flying in what appeared to be a loose battle formation. Upon looking ahead again, I saw coming straight towards me at the same height a silvery spherical object with a bun on top and below. When at what I should imagine was only a few hundreds yards distance it went over to my port side… also travelling at some terrific rate of knots. I was completely shaken by the incident and it took me five or ten minutes to pull myself together. Had I not been so shaken I could probably have taken a head-on cine film of the third object… '[1]

Pilots were not the only people to see flying saucers. On 15 February the same year, a 13-year-old schoolboy took a photograph of a UFO he saw swooping over the Old Men of Coniston mountain in Cumbria. Early that morning Stephen Darbishire was walking on the lower fells with his 8-year-old cousin, Adrian Meyer, 'when Adrian suddenly shouted "Look! What on Earth's that?" and pointed to the sky over Dow Crag'. The two boys then saw an object 'glistening like aluminium in the sunlight' coming towards them. Stephen said: 'You could tell the outline of it very plainly indeed and see port-

holes along the upper part, and a thing which looked like a hatch on top… I took the first picture when it was moving very slowly about three or four hundred yards away and then it disappeared from my view… When it came into sight again I took another picture but then it suddenly went up into the sky in a great swish.'[2]

Meanwhile in the USA, the CIA began to take a close interest in Project Blue Book's investigations. The agency was told by the United States Air Force that around 90 per cent of the sightings reported to them could be explained. However, the CIA's Dr Harris Marshal Chadwell remained concerned that a small residue of sightings, those he described as 'incredible reports from credible observers', could not be ignored. They feared that a UFO panic engineered by the Russians could overload the US air defence system with so many spurious reports that it would not be able to distinguish real aircraft from what he called 'phantoms'.

A flying saucer photographed by 14-year-old Stephen Darbishire on the slopes of the Old Man of Coniston, Cumbria, in February 1954.

CIA Director Walter Bedell Smith felt that: even if 'there was only one chance in 10,000 that the phenomenon posed a threat to the security of the country… even that chance could not be taken.'[3] Accordingly, in January 1953 the CIA convened a panel of non-military scientists in Washington, chaired by the physicist Dr Bob Robertson, to study the most impressive cases reported to date. Dr Robertson, of the California Institute of Technology, was an interesting choice as chair. Eight years earlier he had taken part in an inquiry into the foo-fighter mystery whilst serving as a scientific intelligence officer in Europe during the Second World War (see p. 24).

Other members of the panel included Nobel Prize winner and radar specialist Dr Luis Alvarez, nuclear physicist Dr Samuel Goudsmit and Dr Lloyd Berkner of Brookhaven National Laboratories. During a period of four days, this team scrutinised two films showing UFOs and reviewed a number of case histories presented by Project Blue Book personnel.

They emerged unconvinced that any of the incidents discussed could not be explained through the application of existing scientific knowledge. The panel could find no evidence that any sightings were observations of extraterrestrial spaceships, or posed any threat to national defence. Their findings underlined the CIA's desire to control the release of information on unexplained incidents. They also recognised the danger posed by UFO 'false alarms' clogging military communication channels at tense periods that might lead the authorities 'to ignore real indications of hostile action… and the cultivation of a morbid national psychology in which skilful hostile propaganda could induce hysterical behaviour and harmful distrust of duly constituted authority'.[4]

This paranoid language was typical of the McCarthy era, which was reflected in the panel's recommendation that federal agencies 'take immediate steps to strip the Unidentified Flying Objects of the special status they have been given and the aura of mystery they have unfortunately acquired'.

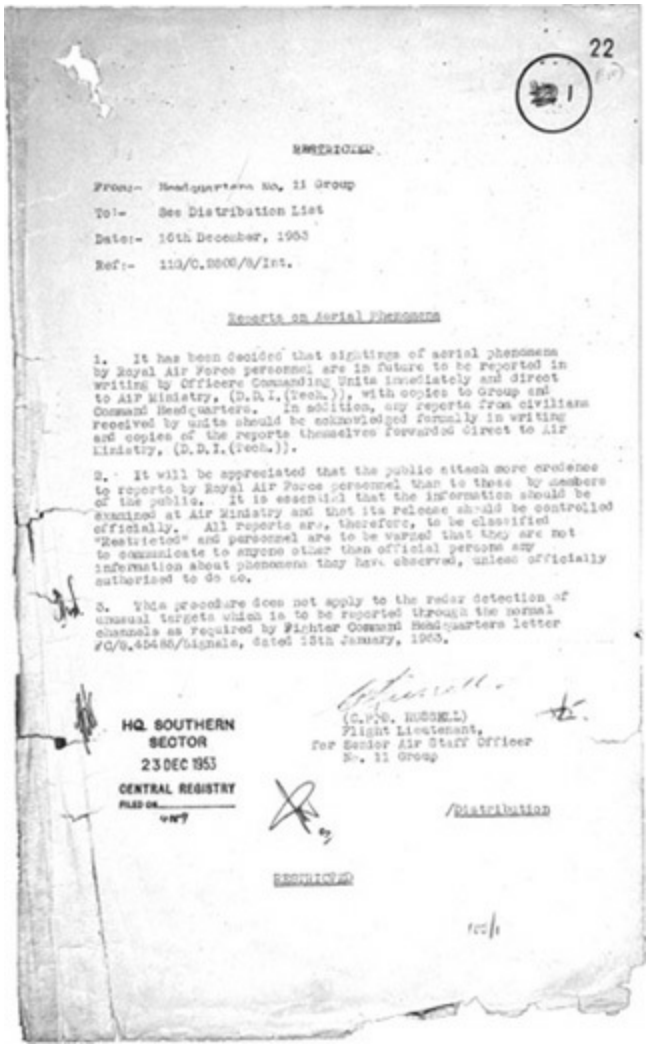
The panel toyed with ideas of elaborate public education campaigns to debunk UFOs, even to the extent of enlisting the resources of the Walt Disney Company to put out an anti-UFO message to the public. None of these suggestions appears to have been implemented, but attempts were made both in the United States and in Britain to restrict the release of information about sightings reported by military personnel unless they could be adequately explained.

UFOS IN PARLIAMENT

Later in 1953 attempts by the British Air Ministry to control the spread of information about UFO sightings reported by RAF personnel were dealt a major blow. On the morning of 3 November, a Vampire night-fighter from RAF West Malling in Kent was on a routine exercise at 20,000 ft over the Thames Estuary when the crew spotted a very bright object straight ahead at a much higher altitude. The UFO was stationary when first seen and shaped like a doughnut with 'a bright light around the periphery'. As they watched, it disappeared in a south-easterly direction. Their story leaked to the Daily Express who discovered that later that same day a Territorial Army unit had tracked 'a very large echo' on their radar moving at 60,000 ft over London. Through a telescope, a sergeant reported seeing 'a circular or spherical object' high in the sky.

This story caused a sensation when it appeared on the front page of the Daily Express under the headline 'Mystery at 60,000 feet'. Questions were tabled in the Commons and on 24 November the Secretary of State for Air, Nigel Birch, moved to reassure MPs there was 'nothing peculiar about either of the occurrences'. The object seen on radar over London, Birch explained, had been traced to balloons released by the Meteorological Office station at Crawley. They were fitted with 'a special device to produce as large an echo on a radar screen as an aircraft'. Laughter erupted when an MP asked if the Minister agreed that 'this story of flying saucers is all balloony'.

Air Ministry files show that orders were sent to all RAF stations in the wake of the unwelcome publicity that followed the West Malling incident, warning that in future all



22

RESTRICTED

From:- Headquarters No. 11 Group

To:- See Distribution List

Date:- 16th December, 1953

Ref:- 113/0.8000/S/Int.

Reports on Aerial Phenomena

1. It has been decided that sightings of aerial phenomena by Royal Air Force personnel are in future to be reported in writing by Officers Commanding Units immediately and direct to Air Ministry, (D.D.I.(Tech.)), with copies to Group and Command Headquarters. In addition, any reports from civilians received by units should be acknowledged formally in writing and copies of the reports themselves forwarded direct to Air Ministry, (D.D.I.(Tech.)).

2. It will be appreciated that the public attach more credence to reports by Royal Air Force personnel than to those by members of the public. It is essential that the information should be examined at Air Ministry and that its release should be controlled officially. All reports are, therefore, to be classified "Restricted" and personnel are to be warned that they are not to communicate to anyone other than official persons any information about phenomena they have observed, unless officially authorised to do so.

3. This procedure does not apply to the radar detection of unusual targets which is to be reported through the normal channels as required by Fighter Command Headquarters letter FC/S.4048/Signals, dated 15th January, 1953.

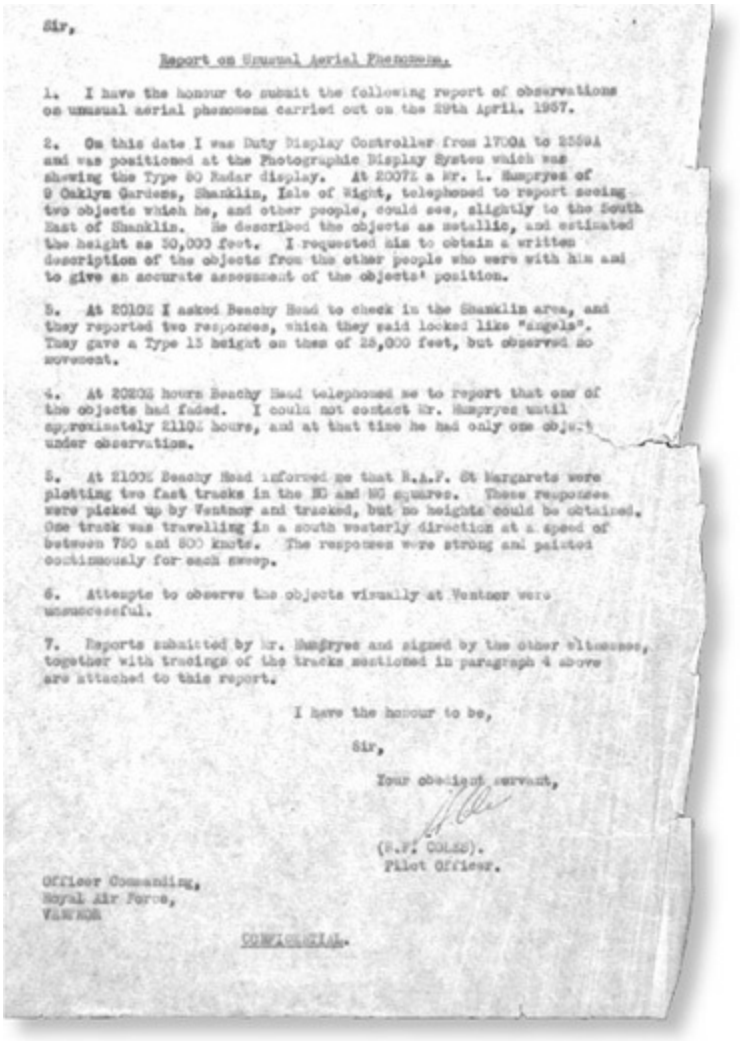
(C.P.S. RUSSELL)
Flight Lieutenant,
for Senior Air Staff Officer
No. 11 Group

HQ. SOUTHERN SECTOR
23 DEC 1953
CENTRAL REGISTRY
FILED ON

/Distribution

RESTRICTED

A restricted Air Ministry letter dated 16 December 1953 that established the first official reporting procedure for UFOs observed by members of the Royal Air Force. The order was sent out after a a sighting by aircrew from RAF West Malling was splashed across page one of the Daily Express. From 1954, all RAF personnel were instructed to report observations to Air Ministry and not to speak to the press. AIR 20/9994



Sir,

Report on Unusual Aerial Phenomena.

1. I have the honour to submit the following report of observations on unusual aerial phenomena carried out on the 29th April, 1957.

2. On this date I was Duty Display Controller from 1700A to 2359A and was positioned at the Photographic Display System which was showing the Type 80 Radar display. At 2007Z a Mr. L. Humpryes of 9 Oaklyn Gardens, Shanklin, Isle of Wight, telephoned to report seeing two objects which he, and other people, could see, slightly to the South East of Shanklin. He described the objects as metallic, and estimated the height as 30,000 feet. I requested him to obtain a written description of the objects from the other people who were with him and to give an accurate assessment of the objects' position.

3. At 2018Z I asked Beachy Head to check in the Shanklin area, and they reported two responses, which they said looked like "angels". They gave a Type 13 height on them of 28,000 feet, but observed no movement.

4. At 2028Z hours Beachy Head telephoned me to report that one of the objects had faded. I could not contact Mr. Humpryes until approximately 2110Z hours, and at that time he had only one object under observation.

5. At 2100Z Beachy Head informed me that R.A.F. St Margarets were plotting two fast tracks in the HG and HG squares. These responses were picked up by Ventnor and tracked, but no heights could be obtained. One track was travelling in a south westerly direction at a speed of between 750 and 800 knots. The responses were strong and painted continuously for each sweep.

6. Attempts to observe the objects visually at Ventnor were unsuccessful.

7. Reports submitted by Mr. Humpryes and signed by the other witnesses, together with tracings of the tracks mentioned in paragraph 4 above are attached to this report.

I have the honour to be,

Sir,

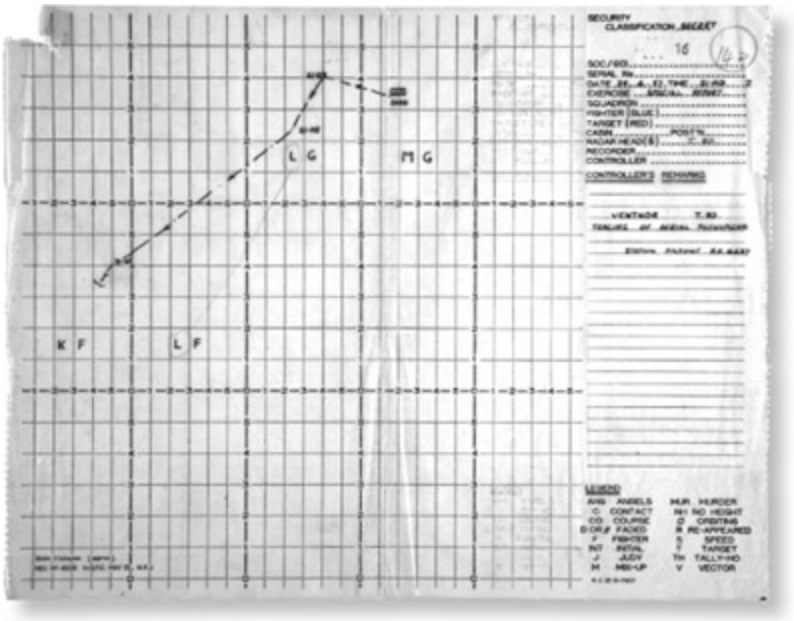
Your obedient servant,

(R.F. COLES).
Pilot Officer.

Officer Commanding,
Royal Air Force,
VENTNOR

CONFIDENTIAL.

The confidential report of the same incident submitted to Air Ministry by Pilot Officer R.F. Coles. The Air Ministry admitted that Javelin fighters were diverted from an exercise to intercept this UFO but saw nothing. Questioned in Parliament the Secretary of State for Air, George Ward, said this was a ‘false alarm’ created by a flight of RAF Hunter aircraft. AIR 20/9994



A diagram produced by radar operators at RAF Ventor to depict the movements of ‘aerial phenomena’ over southern England on 29 April 1957. AIR 20/9994

UFO reports 'are to be classified "Restricted" and personnel are warned not to communicate to anyone other than official persons any information about phenomena they have observed, unless officially authorised to do so.' The RAF order dated 16 December 1953 said reports should be sent to the air intelligence branch DDI (Tech) who were now responsible for the investigation of all UFO reports. It said because 'the public attach more credence to reports by RAF personnel than to those from members of the public… it is essential that the information should be examined at Air Ministry and that its release should be controlled officially.'[5]

This decision marked the first coordinated attempt to define and codify sightings reported to the Air Ministry. In January 1953, shortly after the Robertson panel met (see p. 24), RAF Fighter Command issued the first reporting guidelines for 'unusual targets' detected by radar stations. These required that special reports should be made about any targets 'moving at a ground speed exceeding 700 knots at any height and at any speed above 60,000 feet… When an unusual response is seen, the supervisor… should be informed and he should then check that the echo is not spurious, and arrange for the necessary records to be made.'[6] These instructions were updated following the West Freugh incident (see Chapter 2) when RAF personnel were warned: 'the press are never to be given information about unusual radar sightings… unauthorised disclosures of this type will be viewed as offences under the Official Secrets Act.'[7]

Later the same year the first Air Ministry UFO report form was drawn up, based upon a template of questions used by Project Blue Book staff. The form listed key facts in 10 categories that included date/time and location, name and address of the witness, the height, speed, shape, size and colour of the phenomena observed and classification of sighting as explained or unexplained. Modified versions of this form, with categories of information listed under alphabetical numerals, were still in use by the MoD until quite recently (see p. 158 for an example from 1996).

From 1954 the new Air Ministry UFO unit produced a yearly report 'summarising all UFO sightings by types'. An analysis of 80 reports received to end of 1954 formed the basis of an article in a classified publication known as the Air Ministry Secret Intelligence Summary (AMSIS) during March 1955. This summary, based upon a longer air intelligence report now lost, was classified 'Secret – UK Eyes Only'. Its existence was revealed in May 1955

when the Conservative MP Major Patrick Wall asked the Secretary of State for Air, in a Parliamentary Question, if he would publish the 'report on flying saucers recently completed by the Air Ministry'. Wall had learned about the report from an informant within the Ministry who told him, via a third party: 'there are in fact two reports; the first is a full length report going into some 10,000 words. It does include a number of things which the authorities would certainly consider as secret.'[8]

In his Commons reply, the Air Minister George Ward avoided answering Wall's question directly. Instead he gave a formal statement that said: 'reports of "flying saucers" as well as any other abnormal objects in the sky, are investigated as they come in, but there has been no formal inquiry. About 90 per cent of the reports have been found to relate to meteors, balloons, flares and many other objects. The fact that the other 10 per cent are unexplained need be attributed to nothing more sinister than lack of data.'[9] A more detailed study of 3,200 sightings reported between 1952-54, conducted by the Battelle Memorial Institute on behalf of the USAF, found that 69% could be identified and 9% had 'insufficient information' to reach a conclusion. This left 22% in the category 'unidentified', more than double the number the British Air Ministry were unable to explain.

Although Major Wall was unaware of it at the time, George Ward's statement was evidence of a major change of mind on the part of the British Government. The Flying Saucer Working Party report of 1951 had concluded, in secret, that all UFO reports could be explained (see p. 36). After four years of further investigations, the Air Ministry had admitted that 10 per cent of UFO reports could not after all be explained, even after investigation. The reason given for their continued interest in UFOs was also revealed by the AMSIS report which said 'there is always the chance of observing foreign aircraft of revolutionary design' but '… as for controlled manifestations from outer space, there is no tangible evidence of their existence'.[10]

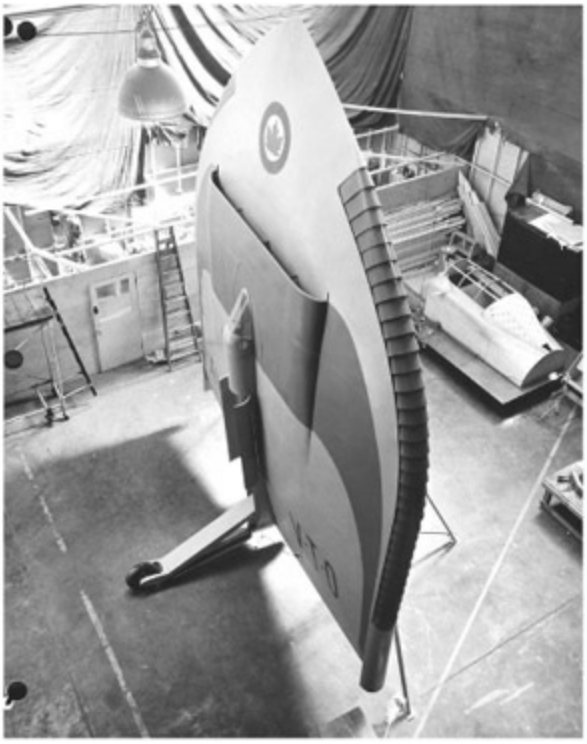
THE SAUCERS THAT CAME IN FROM THE COLD

As chilly East–West relations cooled even further during the 1950s, both sides poured money into military technology. The British and Canadian governments flirted with a number of designs for unorthodox aircraft that were inspired by the flying saucer craze. The most famous of these was a saucer-shaped aircraft,

code-named Project Y, that was designed by British engineer John Frost for A. V. Roe in Canada.

Extravagant claims were made by the company to attract government investment in the project, such as vertical take-off and a high supersonic speed. Photographs taken in a hangar near Toronto in 1953 show a sleek, delta-shaped aircraft that sat on its tail like a rocket.[11] A prototype was built but the British government were unimpressed and the project was taken over by the United States Air Force the following year. The American version reverted to the classic saucer-shape but the two prototype 'Avro-cars' produced performed poorly in tests and the project was cancelled in 1961.

At the same time, both the United States and the Soviet Union became increasingly drawn into a tit-for-tat game of espionage with the ever-present danger of a nuclear confrontation. From the mid-1950s the CIA began to invest in hi-tech aircraft capable of making covert, long-range missions to spy on military and nuclear installations deep within enemy territory. One result of this was the top-secret Skyhook programme. Skyhooks were balloons constructed from special plastics with diameters of more than 200 ft and a gas capacity double that of the Hindenburg airship. From the late 1940s thousands were launched from Alamogordo Air Force Base, now Holloman AFB, near the White Sands missile range in New Mexico. This was the base whose Mogul balloon trains had been linked to the crash of a 'flying saucer' near Roswell in 1947 (see p. 32).



AVIA 65/33 A photograph showing a futuristic ‘flying saucer’ prototype – Project Y – designed by British engineer John Frost and developed by Avro-Canada in 1953. The British government were unimpressed by the performance of the prototype and allowed the project to pass to the US Air Force in 1954. In June that year Dr Harris Marshall Chadwell, deputy head of the CIA’s Office of Scientific Intelligence, asked for reports on ‘the use by any foreign power or nation of non-conventional types of air vehicles, such as or similar to the “saucer-like” planes presently under development by the Anglo/ Canadian efforts.’ AVIA 65/33

As with Mogul, these were no ordinary weather balloons. Their actual purpose was to ride the jet stream to the Soviet Union where sophisticated payloads of cameras suspended in a gondola below the balloons took photographs of sensitive military facilities on the ground. After over-flying Soviet territory, their payload dropped into the ocean where radio beacons guided US planes to collect them.

One of the most dramatic American UFO incidents, when United States Air Force pilot Captain Thomas Mantell crashed to his death whilst chasing a 'flying saucer', was later revealed to be linked to a Skyhook launched by the US Navy in 1948 (see p. 35). Skyhooks may also lie behind a number of British sightings, including the RAF West Malling incident of 1953. A declassified history of balloon operations produced by the USAF Missile Development Center in 1958 reveals that balloon number 175, launched from Holloman, New Mexico, on 27 October 1953, failed to drop into the Atlantic at the end of a scheduled 12-hour flight. Six days later it was this, cruising at high altitude over Kent, that was spotted by the RAF crew and which prompted 'flying saucer' questions in Parliament (see p. 57).

A former member of the Skyhook project staff, Duke Gildenberg, revealed in 2004 that British intelligence concluded this UFO was the Skyhook balloon, but could not reveal the truth because the project was classified top secret at the time. When the Secretary of State for Air, Nigel Birch, was quizzed in Parliament his explanation simply reflected the official weather balloon line that did not reveal any military secrets.[12]

The fact that Skyhook flights occasionally triggered UFO panics as they cruised the stratosphere was an unexpected, though not unwelcome by-product (see panel below). At sunset and dawn the huge balloons reflected sunlight to appear as classic silvery 'flying saucers' to observers below. Gildenberg said Skyhook staff often monitored long-distance Skyhook flights by following 'flying saucer' reports published in newspapers across the world. From 1951 new bases were opened in Scotland, from where the United States Air Force planned to release up to 3,500 of the giant balloons. The project was eventually scrapped in 1956 after achieving only limited success. In total 461 balloons were launched, just half of which penetrated Russian airspace, and of these just 42 gondolas were recovered intact.[13]

All Balloony?

From the 1950s a large number of giant plastic balloons were released by a team led by Professor Frank Powell as part of Bristol University's research into cosmic rays. Some of the balloons were 300–400 ft in diameter. They were inflated with hydrogen and released from RAF Cardington in Bedfordshire, the home of the airship, to take advantage of light summer winds. The balloons would rise into the upper atmosphere carrying payloads of photographic plates that could weigh as much as a tonne. The polythene from which the balloons were made was translucent and although nearly spherical on release they resembled an 'inverted pear' as they rose into the sky. On reaching 100,000 ft, they reflected sunlight and could be seen for hundreds of miles. Balloons released from Cardington would usually follow the prevailing winds and a team from the university were on alert to recover payloads from Ireland, France and other distant locations.

On occasions these cosmic-ray balloons were responsible for 'flying saucer' scares. When 'a shining object' appeared over Central London in July 1954, newspapers and the Air Ministry were inundated with phone calls from people reporting they had seen a flying saucer. A press photographer chased the object in an aircraft and reported it was 'as big as a house'. The 'saucer' eventually landed in a field near Reading where it was recovered by Professor Powell's team.

Project files show how throughout the post-war years the Air Ministry liaised closely with Powell's team in its investigations of UFO sightings.[1] Professor Powell told a reporter: 'every day we send one of these balloons up there will be a least a dozen reports. This is the real secret of the flying saucers if only people would believe it.' At the same time the US Air Force and RAF were also secretly releasing hundreds of Skyhook spy balloons equipped with cameras to obtain images of Soviet nuclear facilities (see p. 62). One of these giant balloons might account for a UFO pursued by one of Britain's most experienced test pilots.

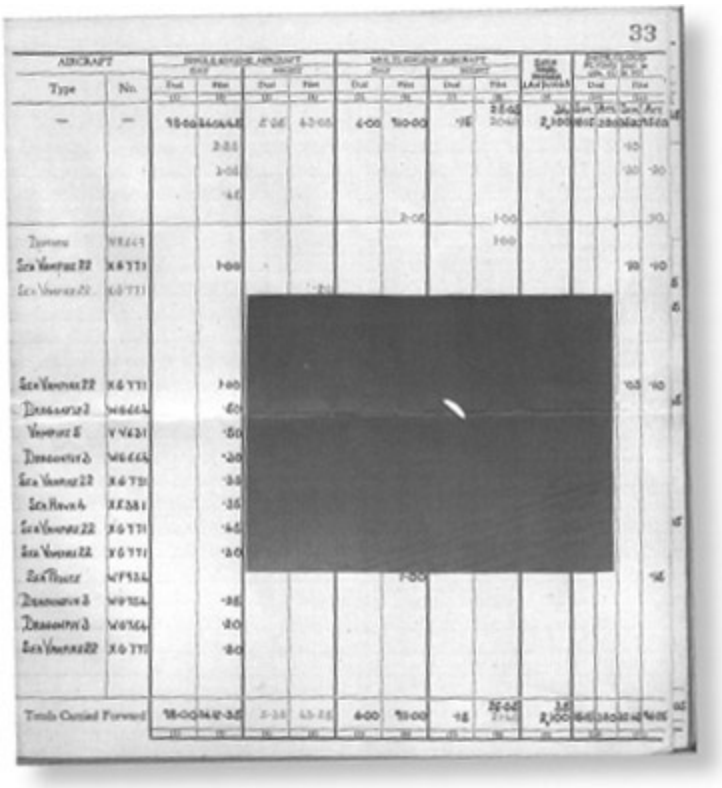
Captain Eric 'Winkle' Brown is the Fleet Air Arm's most decorated pilot and holds the world record for aircraft carrier landings. He saw extensive action in the Second World War and, post 1945, he joined an elite group of Allied pilots who test-flew captured German aircraft. In 1956 whilst Commander of the Royal Naval Air Service station at Brawdy, in West Wales, he found himself chasing a 'flying saucer'. The drama began at dusk on Monday 6 February, when the station received a call from a schoolteacher who

said she could see ‘a flying saucer’ cruising over the West Wales coastline. In his memoir, Wings on My Sleeve (1961), Brown says his first reaction was to laugh, but on checking with a pilot returning from an exercise he was surprised to be told: ‘Yes, and I can damn well see it too.’ When one of the air traffic controllers called down to say the object was visible from Brawdy’s control tower, Brown’s scepticism was sorely tested.

Year 1956 Month	Day	DURATION TIME * AIRBORNE	TIME * LANDED	PILOT	Pilot, Passenger or Duty Performed	DUTY (including Remarks and Remarks)
				—	—	—— Totals Brought Forward
		COMMANDER (AIR) 1 FEB 1956 R.N. AIR STATION DRAWDY		SIGNATURE FOR R.N.A.S.	JANUARY, 1956 DRAWDY Cdr.	AIRCRAFT TYPES: See Route 2, 4; See Variant 22; Diagram 3; Diatone
Feb.	1	1140	1240	Self	4 Passengers	Home C.F.A. School windscreen wiping
Feb.	4	1245	1445	Self	—	G.C. Home Stop Down Screen Approaches Aerobatics
Feb.	4	1525	1748	Self	—	Home Sweet Home! Circuit of Land with slight mist, slightly foggy and humid on Pebbly shore, after one inbound stop at my Lighthouse, which was probably a snow-covered Bellow. Old Glen!
Feb.	7	1430	1530	Self	Lieut Pett	GC Home Stop Down Screen Approach. Aerobatics
Feb.	8	1330	1600	Self	3 Crew/Passengers	Air Test. Barrage to Castlehaven and Return.
Feb.	9	1440	1530	Self	—	Flame-Out G&A. Aerobatics.
Feb.	10	1205	1435	Self	3 Crew/Passengers	Barrage to R.N.A.S. Bellaver and Return.
Feb.	13	1135	1210	Self	—	Glider Tower Flame-Out.
Feb.	13	1405	1440	Self	—	Strafing at Castlemartin Rifle Range.
Feb.	13	1500	1545	Self	—	Strafing at Castlemartin Rifle Range.
Feb.	15	1100	1120	Self	—	Flame-Out G&A. Aerobatics.
Feb.	18	1040	1140	Self	—	Aerobatics G&A.
Feb.	20	1400	1455	Self	Actg. Lieut.	Barrage to Kite and Return.
Feb.	22	1050	1110	Self	Lieut. Pearson	R.A.F. Dive Bombing & Circuit & Landing Practice
Feb.	23	1020	1050	Self	Mr. Thomas	Strafing at Castlemartin Rifle Range. Aerobatics.

* AIRBORNE TIME ONLY TO BE TAKEN TO BE GIVEN

GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (12)] A.E.22 Hrs. 36 Mins.



Two pages from the personal flying logbook of Fleet Air Arm test pilot Captain Eric Brown. The entry records the occasion when he pursued a ‘flying saucer’ in the skies above West Wales, one night in February 1956.

‘I decided it was interesting enough to go and have a look at it and leapt off in a Vampire,’ Brown wrote in his memoirs.[2] He climbed to 35,000 ft in the gathering gloom, all the while keeping an eye on the object which was ‘still above me and unidentifiable in the fading light’. Although visibility was good, Brown eventually gave up the pursuit and returned to Brawdy. Later that night further reports flooded into newspaper offices from puzzled observers across South Wales and the Bristol Channel region. One phone call received by Brown came from an amateur astronomer who took a photograph of the UFO and was adamant it was not a balloon.

In 2011 Captain Brown told me this conversation led him to reject the cosmic research balloon theory ‘which was the only tangible thing I thought it might be’. In his book he wrote that ‘where I once scoffed, I now have an open mind.’ Today, Brown remains open-minded but is less certain of his conclusion published in Wings on My Sleeve. He said the truth can be found in his flying logbook entry, completed on landing at RNAS Brawdy, which reads:

‘Flying Saucer Chase! Unidentified metallic object in sky, sighted from ground. Scrambled in perplexing chase after some iridescent shape at very high altitude, which was probably a cosmic research balloon. What else?’[3]

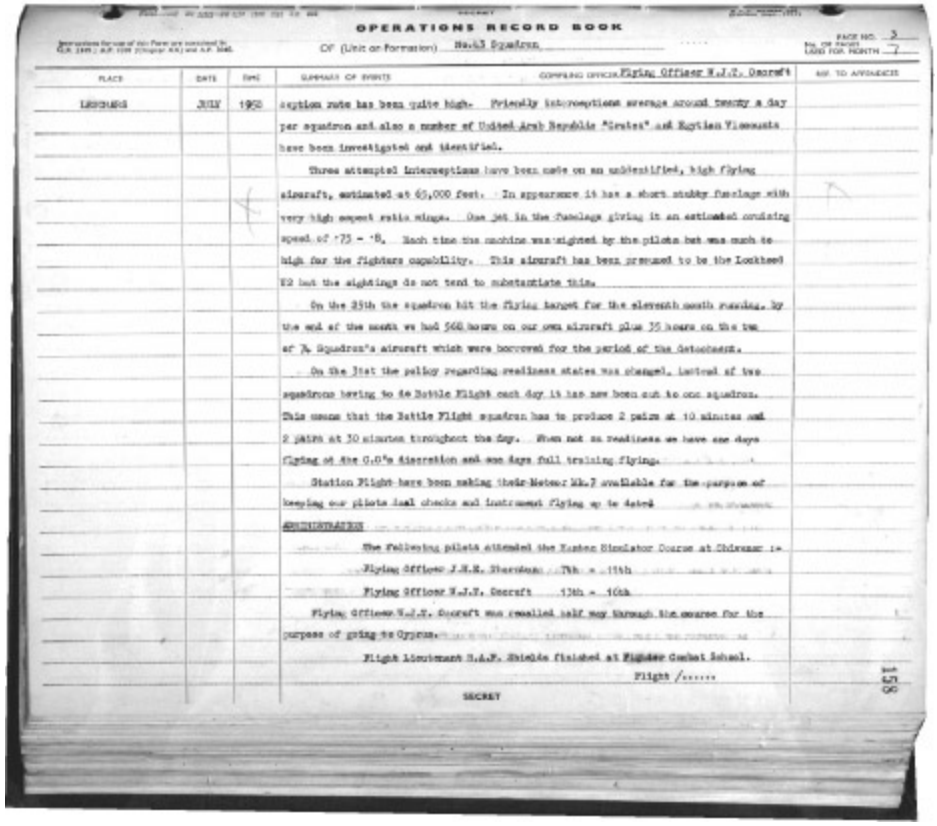
‘AN UNIDENTIFIED HIGH-FLYING AIRCRAFT’

When the Skyhook balloon programme failed to produce satisfactory results, the CIA began testing their high-altitude U-2 spy plane, developed from 1955 at Lockheed’s ‘Skunk Works’ in Burbank, California. The plane could fly at an altitude of 60,000 ft to avoid Soviet radars, way beyond the capabilities of most civil aircraft of the time. The early U-2s were silver, tended to reflect sunlight and often appeared as ‘fiery objects’ to the crews of airliners and military aircraft sent to intercept them. According to the CIA, their staff were able to attribute more than half of all UFO reports made to Project Blue Book from the late 1950s through the 1960s to flights by advanced reconnaissance aircraft such as the U-2 and the SR-71 Blackbird over the US mainland.

As the United States Air Force received thousands of UFO reports during this period, many of which had other explanations, this estimate seems excessive. However, the operations record book of 43 Squadron based at RAF Nicosia in Cyprus records three occasions in July 1958 when fighter crews tried to intercept ‘an unidentified, high-flying aircraft, [at an estimated height]

of 65,000 feet' over the Mediterranean and above the RAF's own capability. Crews assumed this aircraft, which had 'a short stubby fuselage with very high aspect ratio wings' was the U-2, but the RAF could not confirm this identification as the project was highly classified at the time.[14]

Spy plane missions were made in radio silence without notification even to friendly countries on their flight path or indeed the United States Air Force's own air defences. As a result U-2 and SR-71 flights often triggered early-warning systems in the UK and along the Soviet border with Germany. Some researchers believe a number of unexplained UFO reports, such as that from RAF West Freugh in 1957 (see p. 57), where objects were plotted on radar at 70,000 ft, may have been triggered by secret U-2 missions.



OPERATIONS RECORD BOOK

Of (Unit or Formation) No.43 Squadron

PAGE NO. 3

Compiling Officer Flying Officer W.J.F. Doorraft

PLACE	DATE	TIME	SUMMARY OF EVENTS	AIR 27 ARCHIVES
LEUCHARS	JULY	1958	ception rate has been quite high. Friendly interceptions average around twenty a day per squadron and also a number of United Arab Republic "Civies" and Egyptian Vimcounts have been investigated and identified.	
			Three attempted Interceptions have been made on an unidentified, high flying aircraft, estimated at 65,000 feet. In appearance it has a short stubby fuselage with very high aspect ratio wings. One jet in the fuselage giving it an estimated cruising speed of .75 - .8. Each time the machine was sighted by the pilots but was much to high for the fighters capability. This aircraft has been presumed to be the Lockheed U2 but the sightings do not tend to substantiate this.	
			On the 25th the squadron hit the flying target for the eleventh month running. By the end of the month we had 568 hours on our own aircraft plus 35 hours on the two of 74 Squadron's aircraft which were borrowed for the period of the detachment.	
			On the 31st the policy regarding readiness states was changed, instead of two squadrons having to do Battle Flight each day it has now been cut to one squadron. This means that the Battle Flight squadron has to produce 2 pairs at 10 minutes and 2 pairs at 30 minutes throughout the day. When not on readiness we have one days flying at the C.O's discretion and one days full training flying.	
			Station Flight have been using their Meteor Mk.7 available for the purpose of keeping our pilots land checks and instrument flying up to date.	
			ADMINISTRATION	
			The following pilots attended the Rotol Simulator Course at Chivenor :-	
			Flying Officer J.H.K. Sheridan 7th - 11th	
			Flying Officer W.J.F. Doorraft 13th - 16th	
			Flying Officer W.J.F. Doorraft was recalled half way through the course for the purpose of going to Cyprus.	
			Flight Lieutenant D.A.F. Shields finished at Fighter Combat School.	
			Flight /.....	

SECRET

An extract from the Operations Record Book of No 43 Squadron, RAF, describing attempted interceptions of ‘an unidentified high-flying aircraft’ over the Mediterranean in 1958. The aircraft was most likely to have been the CIA’s U-2 spyplane. AIR 27/2775

On the other side of the Iron Curtain, the Soviet Union officially denounced UFOs via a 1961 article published in Pravda as 'fantastic fairytales' spread by the Americans. Here too, however, they occasionally provided a useful cover for military activities the Soviet military wished to conceal from the West. For example, in September 1977 residents of the city of Petrozavodsk were terrified by the appearance of a glowing object like a 'giant jellyfish' that lit up the skies as far west as Leningrad and Helsinki. This UFO was quickly identified by astronomers as the burning tail of a rocket used to launch a spy satellite into orbit from the space centre at Plesetsk. But the Soviet press continued to publish statements from official spokesmen who claimed the spectacular sighting remained unexplained.[15]

THE LAKENHEATH–BENTWATERS INCIDENT

Although a number of Cold War UFO reports could be put down to spy planes, balloons and rocket tests, there were many others made by military pilots from both sides of the Iron Curtain that intelligence agencies have struggled to explain. One of the best-known unexplained incidents occurred at the nuclear-armed United States Air Force airfield at RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk, where the U-2 had been based in April 1956 shortly before the Suez crisis.

On the evening of 13 August 1956, airfield radars at RAF Bentwaters in Suffolk detected a number of unexplained blips, including one travelling at hypersonic speed. Airmen on the ground, and flying in a C-47 transport above the base, reported seeing bright lights, but aircraft sent to investigate could find nothing unusual. Later that night more UFOs were seen on radar by United States Air Force personnel at RAF Lakenheath, 40 miles (65 km) to the northeast; these moved erratically at speeds of between 400 and 600 mph. Lakenheath then alerted RAF Neatishead, a radar station on the Norfolk Broads that defended England's east coast.

The RAF chief controller at Neatishead, Flight Lieutenant Freddie Wimbledon, came forward in 1978 to describe publicly what happened next. He admitted to being initially sceptical, but on checking his radars he was amazed to see an unidentified target at a height of between 10,000 ft and 20,000 ft. The target moved at tremendous speeds and then stopped suddenly, behaviour that was totally unlike any aircraft he had seen on radar before.

Immediately he gave orders to scramble RAF Venom interceptors. When I

spoke to him in 2001 he remembered what happened next: 'After being vectored onto the tail of the object by the interception controller the pilot called "contact" then a short time later "Judy" which meant the navigator had it fairly and squarely on his own radar screen and needed no further help from my controller. After a few seconds, in the space of one sweep of our screens, the object appeared behind our own fighter and our pilot called out: "Lost contact, more help." He was told the target was now behind him and I scrambled a second Venom which was vectored towards the area.'[16] This drama was overheard by RAF and USAF personnel on the ground. Airman Graham Schofield listened to the radio chatter from the crew room at RAF Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire, where Venom interceptor crews were at readiness. He recalled hearing 'a shout of confusion from the pilot who had seen nothing. We then heard "I think they are now on our tail!".'[17]

One of these aircraft appears to have been flown by Squadron Leader Anthony Davis, a veteran of the Second World War, who was Commanding Officer of 23 Squadron in 1956. In a brief account of his experience written 20 years later, Davis says his Venom night-fighter was vectored by RAF ground control towards a suspected UFO, but his radar operator could not make contact with it and he found himself 'chasing a star'.[18]

For his part, Wimbledon remembered the blip on his radar vanishing before the second aircraft approached, almost as if it had given up the chase. He maintained the target was strong and clear, of similar size to a fighter aircraft, but capable of 'terrific acceleration' from a standing start.

More UFOs were spotted on Lakenheath radars in the early hours of 14 August, and again Venoms were scrambled to intercept them. The crews of two Venoms came forward with their accounts in 1995 for a BBC programme on Cold War UFOs. The radar operator on the first aircraft, Squadron Leader John Brady, kept a note in his flying logbook that shows his Venom was scrambled at 2.00 am to investigate something seen by United States Air Force radars at low altitude near RAF Lakenheath. He later recalled:

'The USAF were directing us towards this thing at around 7,000 feet. The first run we had at it I saw nothing. The next time we turned onto a reciprocal heading and I then obtained a contact which I held 10–15 degrees off dead ahead and noticed that it raced down the tube at high speed. We were flying at around 350–400 mph. I remember saying [to the pilot]: "CONTACT … there it's out 45 starboard now at one mile"… and he kept saying to me: "Where is

it? Where is it? I can't see it!" as we rushed past. And it would go down the right hand side or the left hand side [of the Venom]. Two further runs were made with the same result and it was fairly obvious that whatever it was, it was stationary. [The pilot] looked out on each run but could see nothing. My radar contact was firm but messy, but there was something there!'[19]

Flying Saucers

"An Object was reported . . ."

The origin of the term "flying saucer," as applied to strange objects sighted in the sky, remains obscure, although authorship is claimed by a British journalist. According to him, whilst sitting in a Bronx café talking with three New York reporters, one of whom was doodling on a piece of paper, he observed that the drawing looked like a "flying saucer." One of the Americans decided that they "had something" there and, within the hour the term was in use. Within two, it is claimed that ninety people had reported having seen one.

(Restricted)

Man has always instinctively looked to the sky for signs and portents, nor has he, even to-day, quite lost his inclination to discern and report celestial manifestations. It is not the object of this article to decry or deprecate such reportings—as Shakespeare wrote "There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy"—but it is the intention to encourage a rational approach both to the objects themselves and to the method of their reporting.

Generally, reports are of commonplace objects which would normally pass unobserved but which attract attention in the light of more sensational stories, and lend support to them. Thus a meteor or a radio sonde balloon, or even a conventional aircraft, assumes in the perception of some observers speeds, shapes and movements which are entirely uncharacteristic. A well-known astronomer has declared that his experience of the reports of ordinary observers prompts him to reject 95 per cent of what they say, particularly when he knows that they have been startled by a sudden phenomenon which they could have observed for no more than a few seconds.

With such reports we are not seriously concerned. There are a number of other reports on flying saucers which are emphatic statements of visitations from neighbouring planets, and suchlike; these derive both from the imaginings of zealots, admittedly quite serious and sincere in their beliefs, and from charlatans.

VISUAL SIGHTINGS

Reports of sightings themselves reveal certain stereotyped patterns. They usually describe objects as being projectile-shaped, round, oval, or ellipsoidal: they are dazzling-bright, light, shiny, blue-green and generally speaking, iridescent. They move at fantastic speeds in lateral and longitudinal directions: they also hover. Such are the basic lines of description, with inevitable variations.

Practically all of these objects can be roughly identified as follows:—

(a) conventional aircraft viewed by the observers from unaccustomed angles

(b) present-day jet aircraft, flying at great speeds and great heights, rarities by untrained and, on occasion, by experienced observers

(c) sunlight reflections from aircraft and balloons which themselves are too distant to be observed

(d) car headlights reflected on low cloud

(e) meteorological, radio sonde and cosmic research balloons of all types

(f) bright meteors and fireballs

(g) planets observed at certain times of the year

(h) birds

(j) cloud formations

(k) meteorological phenomena, such as mock moons and mock suns.

There are other reports of visual sightings which are admittedly very strange and difficult to classify. They tell of objects which appear to change shape quickly, which move erratically and at fantastic speeds across the sky. Under no consideration could these reports be classified in terms of the objects listed above. It is firmly believed that these reports are made in all sincerity and are in fact

An article summarising the findings of the Air Ministry report on 'flying saucers', published as part of their 'Secret Intelligence Summary' in 1955, concluded that 90% of UFO sightings could be explained. The original report has not been found in the MoD archives and may have been destroyed. AIR 27/2769

A second Venom sent to assist had no more success and both aircraft returned to base, low on fuel, without identifying their target. Shortly afterwards the UFO disappeared from the United States Air Force's radar and did not return. Ralph Noyes, working at the Air Ministry at the time, recalled the panic this incident created. Interviewed in 1989 he said: 'Here we had a number of objects seen coming in across the North Sea on coastal radar. It looked like a Russian mistake. Jet aircraft were scrambled. The objects were travelling at quite impossible speeds and simply made rings round our fastest aircraft. Inevitably this led to the sort of inquiry that you would put in hand if you had any military responsibilities, but we did not particularly want to make public statements about that. Not for something that we had no explanation for.'[20]

Although details of the Lakenheath incident were recorded by Project Blue Book, the file remained classified for 12 years. In 1956 Blue Book investigators concluded the blips seen on radar were probably spurious echoes caused by 'unusual weather conditions' as the events happened on a humid August evening. But when scientists from the University of Colorado UFO project reviewed the file in 1968, their radar expert Gordon Thayer decided it was 'the most puzzling and unusual case in the radar-visual files', adding: 'The apparently rational, intelligence behaviour of the UFO suggests a mechanical device of unknown origin as the most likely explanation for this sighting.'[21]

A very different conclusion appears in the diary of the RAF's 23 Squadron covering events in 1956. The diary refers to 'several attempts' that were made by its pilots to intercept a 'strange object' picked up by radar over Lakenheath, but says nothing was seen by the crews. The diary adds that 'it was later decided that the object must have been a balloon'. Squadron historian Chris Hann says he believes the diary 'provides contemporaneous evidence that the incident was not considered of any importance… rather it was an interesting diversion from an otherwise mundane period'.[22]

This evidence may explain why the Air Ministry destroyed its own records of this remarkable incident. In 1972 one of the key witnesses, now Air Commodore Tony Davis, became head of the MoD branch responsible for UFOs on his retirement from the RAF. During his tenure on the 'UFO desk' Davis confirmed, in response to a question from a UFOlogist, that RAF papers covering the incident had been destroyed but added 'if there had been any evidence to indicate the existence of an unidentified but real flying object (and

not just an anomalous radar echo) they would of course have been retained and investigated in great depth'.[23]

Today the single surviving official reference to the Bentwaters-Lakenheath flap occurs in an intelligence briefing to the Under Secretary of State for Air, George Ward MP, in May 1957. Under the category of 'unexplained radar incidents' the note plays down its significance, referring to: 'a report of an unusual object on Lakenheath Radar which at first moved at a speed of between two and four thousand knots [2,300–4,600 mph] and then remained stationary at a high altitude. No visual contact was made with this object by the Venom sent to intercept it and other radars failed to pick it up.'[24]

INTERCEPT UFO!

Even the dramatic Lakenheath incident pales in significance compared to the story told by a retired United States Air Force pilot who claims he was ordered to shoot down a UFO over East Anglia. Lieutenant Milton Torres first spoke publicly about his experience at a squadron reunion in 1988 and his written account was sent to the Ministry of Defence shortly afterwards. When the file containing the letter was opened by The National Archives in 2008, it threw new light upon yet another dramatic UFO incident reported by front-line fighter pilots at the height of the Cold War. This story has been pieced together from a number of different sources, including my own correspondence with Milton Torres.

In 1956 Lieutenant Torres flew F-86 sabre dogs with the 406th Fighter Bomber Wing based at RAF Manston in Kent. It was from the runway at Manston that Torres, then a 25-year-old pilot, was waiting in his aircraft when the order came to scramble near midnight one 'typical English night' late that year. Whereas other fighter aircraft of the period carried a pilot and navigator, with the F-86D the pilot had to both fly the aircraft and operate the airborne radar. This was used to 'lock onto' to the target once it was within a range of 15 miles.

On this particular night Torres received his orders from a RAF controller who was tracking a UFO from an underground radar station at Kelvedon Hatch in Essex. Torres recalls being vectored to a point at 32,000 ft over East Anglia before the action began. Ground control briefed him that the RAF were tracking an unidentified target that had been orbiting the area for some time,

displaying ‘very unusual flight patterns’, for example remaining motionless for long periods.

Then orders came to fire afterburners and Torres, with his wingman following slightly behind him and below, turned towards the target. Over the radio the controller asked both pilots to report any visual contact but they could not see anything. Torres then received a startling order to fire a full salvo of rockets at the UFO. The order was so unusual that it remains vivid in his memory today; so unusual that he stalled, demanding authentication before he opened fire. The F-86D had a formidable armoury of 24 unguided rockets – dubbed ‘Mighty Mouse’ – carried in a missile tray beneath the fuselage. Each weighed 18 lbs and had the explosive power of a 75-mm artillery shell.

As seconds passed, authentication was confirmed and in the darkness of his cramped cockpit Torres struggled to select his weapons. His account sent to the MoD in 1988 says: ‘I used my flashlight, still trying to fly and watch my radar… The final turn was given, and the instructions were given to look 30 degrees to port for my bogey… there it was exactly where I was told it would be… burning a hole in the radar with its incredible intensity.’[25]

In this account Torres describes the size of the blip visible on his radar scope as similar to that produced by a giant B-52 bomber. He remains convinced that it was the best target he could remember having locked onto during his entire flying career. Torres told me what happened next when I interviewed him in 2003: ‘After we were on our final vector I called “Judy” at 15 miles… The F-86D was flat out and at about .92 Mach and we were closing very fast.’ With just 10 seconds to go, Torres saw the target begin to move away from him and was asked again if he could see anything. On his radar screen the blip had broken lock and was now leaving his 30-mile range. He reported the UFO had gone, only to be told the blip had also left the ground scope, in two sweeps of the radar, which he later realised indicated ‘a speed in excess of 1,000 knots (more like double or triple Mach numbers)’.

With the UFO gone, the two pilots returned to RAF Manston with orders to contact the RAF by landline. They were told little other than the mission was considered classified, but the following day he was debriefed by a civilian who arrived from London. In his statement sent to the MoD and released by The National Archives in 2008 he wrote: ‘This gentleman was definitely an American and I think that the ID he had was a National Security Agency – but that is only a perception.… He advised me after listening to my story [that] it

was top secret and he forbade me to tell anyone about the incident; he then scared the hell out of me by saying any breach in security would result in my being grounded permanently.'[26]

Some 30 years passed and it was only after retirement that Torres felt confident to talk publicly about his experience. Compounding the mystery is the almost complete lack of contemporary records relating to the incident. In the files released during 2008, the MoD admit that all Air Ministry UFO records from this period have been destroyed and there is no mention of the incident in the USAF Project Blue Book archives. Only intelligence briefings prepared by the Air Ministry for the Secretary of State George Ward in 1957 have survived at The National Archives. Ward was told there had been three 'unexplained radar incidents' during 1956, one of these being the report from RAF Lakenheath. Another involved an object seen on radar by a United States Air Force base in Essex and adds: 'one of the two aircraft sent to intercept made a momentary contact the other made no contact at all'.[27]

The documents briefly mention four other radar incidents from 1957 that remained 'unexplained', including one when 'unusual responses which did not resemble aircraft' were detected by RAF radars on the east coast. Again, fighter aircraft were scrambled but failed to make contact with anything.

Ralph Noyes said he was shown gun-camera film taken by RAF aircrew during this period at a secret screening attended by officials in a sub-ground cinema at the MoD Main Building during 1970. Years later, in a letter sent to the MoD, he says a dozen senior RAF officials were present along with a representative from the Meteorological Office. Noyes said: 'we were shown some slides, purportedly from aerial photographs taken by [RAF] air crew. The highlight was a couple of brief clips of what I understand to be gun-camera material obtained as far back as 1956. The Bentwaters-Lakenheath events were mentioned. The material was, on the whole, unimpressive: fuzzy greyish blobs in the daylight shots; small glowing globular objects in the night films.'

Noyes said he felt the 'small informal gathering in the cinema was an opportunity to test the reactions of a few of us to the unusual objects caught on film'. But apart from a suggestion they were witnessing 'unusual meteorological events' no conclusions were reached and Noyes heard nothing more about the fate of the films. Files released by The National Archives reveal that following his retirement, Noyes wrote to the MoD twice asking if

these films had survived. On both occasions he was told no trace of them could be found. He believed 'the material was simply scrapped, or "pinched" for someone's private collection of curiosa, or conceivably passed to the Meteorological Office'.[28]

UFOS IN THE SWINGING SIXTIES

From 1953 onwards, the air intelligence branch DDI (Tech) was responsible for the investigation of UFO reports deemed to be possible defence threats. As an intelligence organisation operating in secrecy during a period of great international tension, they were naturally anxious to avoid any security risk that could arise from direct contact with the public, particularly the growing number of UFO enthusiasts. As public fascination with UFOs increased, the Air Ministry decided to offload responsibility for dealing with the public and the press onto a more suitable department. This was S6 (Air), an Air Staff secretariat that routinely dealt with questions relating to RAF activities such as low flying complaints. Civil servants, rather than military officers, were seen as the best choice for those occasions when questions about UFOs required a careful response. A civil servant with S6, David West, set the tone for future UFO policy by noting in 1958 that when dealing with the public he would consult intelligence branches only when it was necessary, 'but for the most part we expect to be politely unhelpful'.[29]

A black and white photograph showing a UFO fleet over Sheffield in 1962, taken by 14-year-old Alex Birch on a Box Brownie camera. After the photograph was published in the News of the World, Alex's father wrote to the Air Ministry offering the print for analysis. He and his son were invited to visit the Air Ministry in London where officials examined the camera and photo. They concluded the photograph was produced by sunlight reflecting from 'ice crystals' in the smoky atmosphere. This conclusion satisfied no one and led some UFOlogists and members of the public to suspect the government were determined to 'cover up' evidence of alien activity. AIR 2/16918

From that point onwards, S6 and its successors became known publicly as 'the UFO desk', the central – and only officially acknowledged – focus for public correspondence on the subject. Although the name of the department dealing with UFOs changed periodically, from S6 to S4 in 1964 and then to DS8 and Sec(AS) during the 1980s, the civil servants responsible for answering letters and Parliamentary questions maintained, in public at least, the same level of official disinterest displayed by David West.

During the course of the next 50 years, even at the busiest times, responding to letters and UFO reports and drafting responses to MPs occupied only a tiny fraction of a desk officer's duties. As a small part of the department's wider responsibilities, UFOs were largely looked upon as at best an interesting distraction and at worst a nuisance. As David West explained in 2006: 'Our policy was largely reactive. When questions were asked by MPs or stories were published in the newspapers we responded. But we were not really focussed on UFOs. At that time we were far more concerned with the Suez crisis.'[30]

Despite its nickname, it was never the responsibility of those who manned 'the UFO desk' to investigate those reports that could not be easily explained. Following the abolition of the Air Ministry and the creation of the unified Ministry of Defence in 1964, this duty was passed to branches of the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS). Publicly, the MoD said their 'UFO desk' dealt with all UFO matters and its staff took advice from other branches only when it was necessary. However, files at The National Archives make it clear that in the few cases 'where no immediate satisfactory explanation can be determined – i.e. they are truly UFOs', these were passed to the Defence Intelligence Staff for further investigation. As DI Squadron Leader Cliff Watson put it: 'S4 (Air) [the UFO desk] was responsible for reports in the public domain, whereas I was responsible for military investigations.'[31]

'… AN EERIE GREENY COLOUR'

Initially, a number of Defence Intelligence Staff branches were secretly involved in UFO investigations, but from 1967 all unexplained incidents were reported to DI55. Their primary role was to collect intelligence on Soviet guided missiles and satellite launches that were occasionally reported as UFOs. Despite the risk involved in making inquiries into UFO sightings, on

occasions intelligence officers felt they had no option but to follow up incidents that received national publicity.

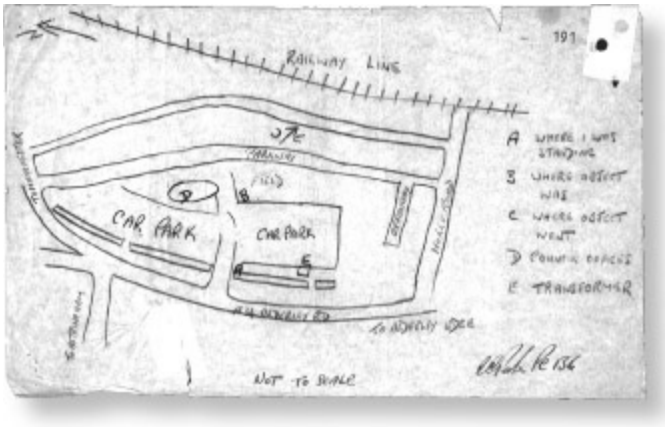
One example followed a sighting in January 1966 made by a Cheshire police constable, Colin Perks. The constable, then 28, reported seeing a glowing green object hovering behind a row of houses in Wilmslow whilst on early morning patrol. A copy of his report was sent to the Ministry of Defence. In his police statement Perks reported how:

'… about 4 am on [7 January 1966] I was checking property at the rear of a large block of shops which are situated off the main A34 Road (Alderley Road) Wilmslow. At 4.10 am I was… facing the back of the shops when I heard a high pitched whine… for a moment I couldn't place the noise as it was most unfamiliar to the normal surroundings. I turned around and saw a greenish/grey glow in the sky about 100 yards from me and about 35 feet up in the air… I stopped in my tracks and was unable to believe what I could see. However, I gathered myself together after a couple of seconds and made the following observations.

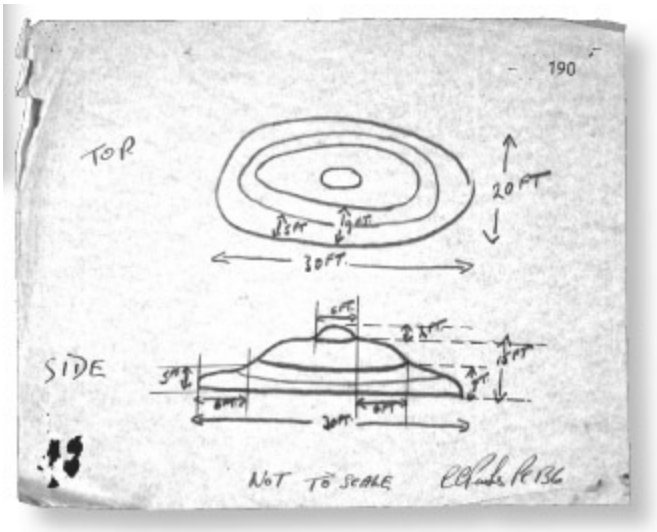
'The object was about the length of a bus (30 feet) and estimated at being 20 feet wide. It was [elliptical] in shape and emanated a green grey glow which I can only describe as an eerie greeny colour. It appeared to be motionless in itself, that is there is no impression of rotation. The object was about 15 feet in height [with] a flat bottom.

'At this time it was very bright and there was an east wind. Although it was cold there was no frost… The object remained stationary for about five seconds then without any change in the whine it started moving at a very fast rate in an East-South-East direction. It disappeared from view very quickly. When it started moving it did not appear to rotate but move off sideways with the 30 foot length to the front and rear.'[32]

PC Perks ended his report: 'There is no doubt that the object I saw was of a sharp distinctive, definite shape and of a solid substance. However I did not notice any vents, portholes or other place of access. The glow was coming from the exterior of the object and this was the only light which was visible. I checked with Jodrell Bank and Manchester Airport control shortly after the incident but they could not help or in any way account for what I had seen.'



A map drawn by PC Perks showing the position of the UFO he encountered in January 1966 in a car park behind a row of shops in Wilmslow, Cheshire in 1966. AIR 2/17983



A drawing of the same UFO. PC Perks estimated it to have been 30ft in length. AIR 2/17983

Afterwards Perks drew a sketch that shows an elliptical object similar to an upturned jelly mould. The police constable's account was deemed to be so reliable and detailed that the MoD sent a defence intelligence officer, Flight Lieutenant M. J. P. Mercer, to interview Perks. Details of this visit were kept secret until 1997 when the MoD file containing his report was opened at The National Archives. In Mercer's report to DIS, he said that PC Perks: 'had not read any books on the subject [of UFOs] nor had he seen anything similar before. There is no reason to doubt the fact that this constable saw something completely foreign to his previous experience.'[33]

Mercer visited the scene of the encounter and checked radar records but found nothing unusual had been detected. He concluded his report with the following: 'On the evidence available… it is not possible to arrive at any concrete conclusion. This is always likely to be the case with such 'one man' sightings… On the information available it would be unwise if [we] speculated on possible explanations… [but] it is perhaps pertinent to quote from an article by Dr Allen Hynek, an American astronomer who advises the USAF on the subject of UFOs: "… so far I have come across no convincing evidence that any of these mysterious objects come from outer space or from other worlds." We would agree with this conclusion.'[34]

THE FLYING CROSS

During the summer and autumn of 1967, Britain experienced one of its most intense UFO flaps. The MoD received a sighting virtually every day of that year from a variety of sources including large numbers from police officers. The greatest number of sightings occurred during October 1967 when a spectacular report triggered off a surge of new incidents. In the early hours of 24 October, PCs Roger Willey and Clifford Waycott were on patrol in their police car near Holsworthy in North Devon when they saw a strange light in the sky that appeared to be at treetop height. PC Willey described the UFO as 'a star-spangled cross radiating points of light from all angles'. The pair drove immediately towards the light, which appeared to move away from them. Giving chase, at one stage their patrol car reached speeds of up to 90 mph as it pursued the UFO along narrow and twisting country lanes on the edge of Dartmoor. PC Roger Willey, speaking at a televised news conference afterwards, said: 'At first it appeared to the left of us, then went in an arc, and dipped down and we thought it had landed. It seemed to be watching us and

wouldn't let us catch up… It had terrific acceleration and seemed to know we were chasing it.'[35]

Eventually they gave up the chase and pulled up behind a parked Land Rover to wake the sleeping occupant, 29-year-old Richard Garner. He said one of the policeman pointed to the horizon, where a bright light was hovering in the sky. 'I thought I was having a nightmare when they woke me up… They said they wanted confirmation of what they had seen. I don't know what it was, but this object was much too bright for a star.'[36]

The policeman's story was featured on TV news and the press dubbed the UFO 'the flying cross'. For a full week UFOs dominated the headlines and dozens of new reports of the 'flying cross' were reported in the early hours by police officers in Hampshire, Sussex and Derbyshire. The MoD file on the events of 1967 at The National Archives contains 79 reports from the month of October alone. One came from retired RAF Wing Commander Eric Cox who spotted a UFO shortly after watching a television news report on the Devon police officer's experience. Cox was driving with his wife near Fordingbridge in the New Forest the following night when they saw 'seven lights in the sky at low altitude, very bright but not dazzling'. He said: 'They appeared to be in a "V" formation and stayed absolutely still, for about three minutes after which time the three on the right-hand side appeared to recede or fade. The remaining four lights then formed into a perfect formation of a cross or plus sign. These remained for about three minutes when they too faded or receded rapidly.'

Cox ended his account: 'I do not believe in "little green men" nor in flying saucers but I am certain they cannot be dismissed as easily as authority would deem. I have never before seen anything like them and incidentally I am a tee-totaller.'[37]

The UFO panic led to a series of questions in Parliament and demands for an official study similar to that underway in America, where the University of Colorado had received a contract to produce a scientific report based upon the sightings recorded in Project Blue Book's files. The MoD resisted pressure for a similar inquiry in Britain but considered calling upon Professor R. V. Jones, now in retirement, to act as a consultant if the sightings continued. Towards the end of the year, a briefing prepared for the Secretary of State for the RAF, Merlyn Rees MP, revealed almost half of the 362 sightings had been identified as aircraft. Satellites and space debris accounted for 57 reports, balloons 42 and bright stars and planets a further 26.

A residue of 46 reports remained ‘unexplained’ but as UFO desk head Jim Carruthers told Mr Rees, these simply lacked ‘information vital to their explanation’. He said there was ‘nothing in any of them to suggest that the incidents to which they relate are any different in nature to those mentioned in the reports that have been explained’. Most were generated not by an increase in UFO activity, he continued, but as a result of an increase in public awareness of the subject. People were looking at the sky, ‘impelled either by the good weather or by Press aroused curiosity… [and] the increased number of reports show that it is becoming fashionable to see UFOs’.[38]

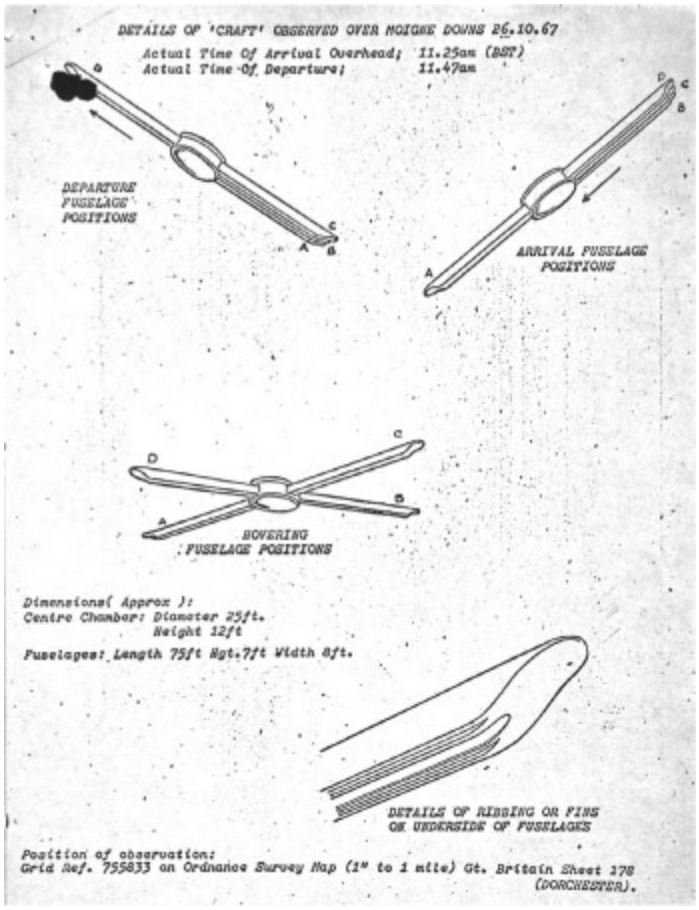
Meanwhile DI55 sent a scientific officer, Dr John Dickison, to interview the two Devon police constables. His brief report concluded the most likely explanation was they had seen and pursued a bright star or planet, possibly Venus: ‘when questioned… one of the police constables indicated that… he had decided that the light [they saw] came from a spaceship. They did not see a spaceship but only a light and his conclusion appears to have no factual basis.’[39]

Many of the ‘flying cross’ incidents reported during October 1967 described bright lights seen in the early hours on the eastern horizon, where Venus remained a bright, conspicuous celestial object. In fact, Venus is so often mistaken for a UFO that she has been called ‘the Queen of UFOs’. Two years later Jimmy Carter, who later became President of the United States, was with a group of 10 people who watched a brilliant light low on the horizon that appeared to move towards them and then away whilst changing in brightness, size and colour. They estimated the distance as between 300 ft and 100 ft and said the UFO was at times as big and bright as a full moon. Carter reported the sighting to Project Blue Book in 1973, but when details were checked by an astronomer it was found he was looking directly at the brilliant planet Venus.[40]

DAYDREAM OR REALITY?

The 1967 UFO flap made the MoD look again at how they dealt with UFOs. Forced into action by pressure from MPs and the media, they assembled a small team of experts drawn from the RAF and the Defence Intelligence Staff, who were placed on stand-by to make field investigations of credible reports. The team included Dr Dickison, Leslie Ackhurst from the ‘UFO desk’ and a RAF psychologist, Alex Cassie. One report scrutinised by this three-man team

was one of the strangest ever to reach the MoD.


DETAILS OF 'CRAFT' OBSERVED OVER MOIGNE DOWNS 26.10.67
Actual Time Of Arrival Overhead; 11.25am (BST)
Actual Time Of Departure; 11.47am
DEPARTURE FUSELAGE POSITIONS
ARRIVAL FUSELAGE POSITIONS
HOVERING FUSELAGE POSITIONS
Dimensions(Approx):
Centre Chamber: Diameter 25ft.
Height 12ft
Fuselages: Length 75ft Hgt.7ft Width 8ft.
DETAILS OF RIBBING OR FINS ON UNDERSIDE OF FUSELAGES
Position of observation:
Grid Ref. 755833 on Ordnance Survey Map (1" to 1 mile) Gt. Britain Sheet 178 (DORCHESTER).

A report and drawing by Angus Brookes describing the transparent ‘flying cross’ he saw hovering above the Moigne Downs, Dorset, in broad daylight on 26 October 1967. AIR 20/11890

A file at The National Archives contains details of the sighting by Angus Brooks, a retired BOAC Comet Flight administration officer. Brooks claimed he had a 'close encounter' on the Dorset coast in daylight on 26 October 1967, at the height of the 'flying cross' flap. Brooks said he had taken his two dogs for a walk on the Moigne Downs during a fierce gale and found shelter by lying flat on his back in a hollow. In his report to the MoD, he said the UFO suddenly appeared 'descending at lightning speed' towards him. It then 'decelerated with what appeared to be immensely powerful reverse thrust to level out at approximately a quarter of a mile to the south of my position at 200–300 foot height'.

Brooks described this object as 150 ft long with a central circular chamber from the front of which extended a long 'fuselage'. Three more long fuselages extended from the rear and these moved to positions equidistant around the centre of the craft, so that it took the shape of a giant cross. Brooks said he remained frozen to the spot for the 20 minutes the UFO remained visible fearing that he might be 'captured' if he moved. He noticed that the silent object was constructed from some translucent material as '[it] took on the colour of the sky above it and changed with clouds passing over it.' Then the two central fuselages folded back to their original position and the UFO disappeared in the direction of the Winfrith Atomic Research Station. Brooks' pet Alsatian returned to his side at this point and appeared distraught. He believed that she might have been distressed by a VHF sound emitted by the UFO although he heard nothing during the experience.

Suspecting the object may have been interested in the power station or a nearby US naval base, Brooks reported his sighting to the police and the MoD. When the MoD team, whom Brooks referred to as 'the James Bond department', arrived at his home, they were taken to the spot where the UFO hovered and Brooks relived his experience in detail. In their report 'the James Bond department' described how they were immediately suspicious that such a large object could have hovered for the length of time claimed without anyone else having spotted it. They decided it was more likely Brooks had seen something ordinary, such as a kite or a hawk, and this had become transformed into a UFO 'whilst he was in a dream or a near sleep state'. The psychologist member of the MoD team, Alex Cassie, believed that Brooks may have experienced 'a vivid daydream' when he lay down to shelter from the wind. He suggested the dream could have been influenced by the news reports of the 'flying cross' or triggered off by a piece of dead skin, moving in the fluid of his

eyeball.[41]

Cassie discovered that Brooks had lost the sight in his right eye in an accident, but this had been restored by a corneal graft. He speculated this operation might have made Brooks more prone to seeing elaborate 'floaters'. But he admitted these would not have remained visible for 20 minutes and he could only account for the whole experience by turning to the 'daydream' theory. In his opinion: '[Brooks'] instant knowledge and certainty of the size and distance of the UFO and its intent, are all suggestive of the immediate and inexplicable awareness which are characteristic of many dreams.'

Although he could not prove his theory was correct, Cassie concluded 'it just seems possible, even likely'. But he could not resist adding a caveat, albeit tongue-in-cheek, to his report: 'if his experience can't be explained in some such way, then maybe he saw an Extra Terrestrial Object!' DI55 agreed, but added that '[we] think that the probability of there being an E.T.O. is of a very low order'.

Brooks circulated his report to UFO magazines and newspapers before the MoD team produced their conclusion. The Ministry was acutely aware from past experience that any statements they made in writing would receive maximum publicity. In the letter sent to Brooks, Ackhurst carefully explained their theory and said the team did not doubt that he had an experience 'for which no proven explanation can be given' but added: 'we have concluded that you did not see a "craft" either man-made or from outer space.'[42]

As Daily Express science writer Robert Chapman noted at the time, the MoD's attempts to explain away Angus Brooks' experience were doomed to failure because 'the explanations themselves are as far fetched as, if not more so than, the actual sightings.' Privately MoD officials felt that all rational explanations should be explored first before turning to fantastic explanations such as extraterrestrial visitors. A secret DI55 briefing from 1968 notes that: 'we have always said that it would be conceited not to admit that there might be intelligent life in some part of the galaxy; however, we have no scientific evidence that this is so or that there have been penetrations of our environment by any manifestation of such life. There is no scientific evidence that UFOs exist, but there are, of course, plenty of balloons, space junk and hallucinations.'[43]

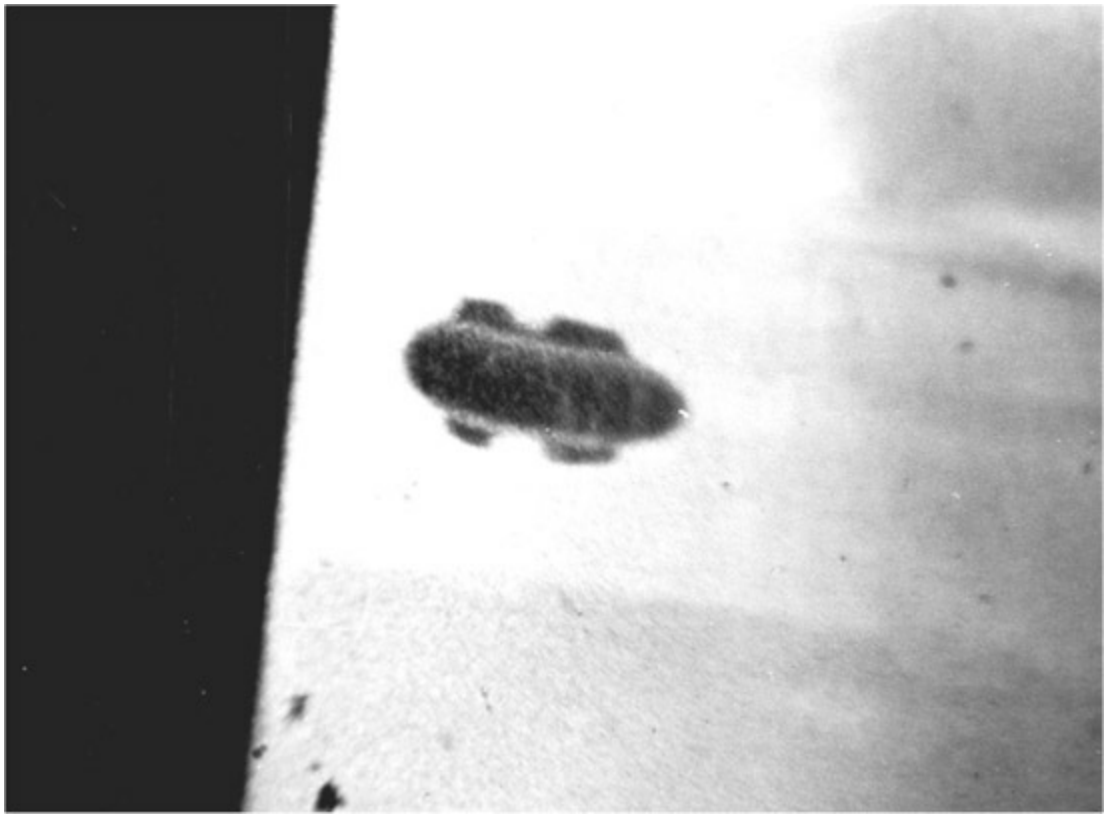
'AMAZING PICTURES OF A FLYING SAUCER'

For these reasons doubt would always continue to surround those UFO experiences where the only evidence was the testimony of a single witness. In a few rare cases, however, an explanation came to light that left no shadow of doubt. One of these happened in March 1966 when Joan Oldfield and her husband Tom, from Helmshore, Lancashire, were passengers on an airliner flying from Manchester to London. The couple were on their way to say goodbye to relatives who were emigrating to Australia and carried a cine camera with them.

As the aircraft cruised at 9,000 ft over Staffordshire at 8.00 am on a bright sunny morning, Mrs Oldfield, glancing out of a window, spotted what she first thought was a small plane tracking them. She immediately picked up her cine camera and filmed the object, which was totally unlike any other aircraft she had ever seen. As the film rolled, the flat, cigar-shaped UFO appeared to pull away and retract four fin-like objects into its body before disappearing. When the couple replayed their cine film they discovered they had captured 160 colour frames featuring the UFO, running to seven seconds of viewing time.

The story was flashed around the world and stills from the film were proclaimed by the News of the World as proof that 'craft from outer space' had visited Britain. The film was sent to the MoD for study, but it was the BBC who solved the mystery. On 21 April the popular BBC1 evening science programme Tomorrow's World sent a reporter, Francis Greene, to reconstruct the Oldfield's exact flight, using the same plane and taking pictures from the same seat the couple used. His film conclusively proved the 'craft from outer space' was actually a distorted reflection of the airliner's tailplane, visible only from one specific spot inside the cabin. As a MoD official noted, the tailplane had been 'distorted by the optical effects of the curvature of the "porthole glass" [and] the images all appear towards the rear of the porthole, where the glass is curved in towards its mounting'.[44]

This example illustrates the difficulties faced by official investigations of UFOs where time and resources are always in short supply. The author of the Air Ministry's Secret Intelligence Summary appreciated this problem when he wrote: 'the investigation of [UFOs] presents very apparent difficulties, the major one of which is that, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the scent is completely cold. It is only fair to point out that in every other case, i.e. when reports are telephoned and promptly checked on the spot, the sighted object has been identified as a balloon or a conventional aircraft.'[45]



The UFO that wasn't. An optical illusion produced by the curvature of the glass in an aeroplane's window seemed to show a shape-changing UFO over Staffordshire. AIR 2/17983

CHAPTER 4
Close Encounters

In June 1969 Norfolk police sent the Ministry of Defence details of two strange experiences that had occurred within 24 hours of each other. The first of these came from an electrical engineer, Robin Peck, whom they described as 'a very level-headed person who has been genuinely frightened by [his] experience'. Peck made the statement concerning his sighting at 12.25 am on 19 June 1969:

'I was passing through Bircham when the lights on my vehicle started to dim. Within a few moments they had dimmed to such an extent that I was unable to see, and pulled up on my nearside. As I did this the engine also cut out and I could get no ignition light. Suspecting a fault with the battery, I got out and went to the bonnet. It was then that I experienced a feeling that the air was full of static, and my hair felt to be standing on end. I then saw an object in the sky about 100 feet from the ground. This object appeared to be like an inverted mushroom, approximately the size of a row of several cottages. It was of a very pale blue colour, surrounded by a golden glow. The object emitted no sound whatsoever and remained in this position for a least a minute. It then moved off towards King's Lynn, still without a sound. When it moved off the blue colour appeared to leave a haze trail following the object. I went back and sat in my vehicle for some minutes rather shaken, then by reflex rather than anything else I tried to start the engine and found that everything worked perfectly again.'[1]

Police linked Peck's experience with a report from 17-year-old Arthur Hendry, a trainee carpenter, who lived nearby. Before midnight on the next day, 20 June, he was getting ready to cycle home when he heard a strange whistling noise above him, but could see nothing. In a statement to police he said the noise then became louder and intensified to a powerful throbbing. 'I suddenly felt as if every muscle in my body locked, and I was unable to release my grip on my cycle,' he said in a police statement. 'After a few seconds the noise disappeared and I felt almost normal again… it had felt as if I was receiving a severe electric shock and electricity was passing through my body from my

head to my feet.'[2]

MoD scientists suspected the two men may have experienced a type of rare atmospheric phenomena similar to ball lightning (see p. 13). Checks by the Meteorological Office, however, found the skies over East Anglia were clear, with no thunderstorms at the relevant time. Unable to explain the strange electromagnetic effects reported, a desk officer concluded '[this] sounds like a genuine UFO' and closed the file.

A Visit from the Men in Black

When the MoD received UFO reports from 'credible witnesses' such as police officers, it would sometimes send intelligence officers to interview them. It is possible some of these visits were responsible for the legend of the 'Men In Black'. The MIB are mysterious and sinister figures who visit UFO witnesses to collect evidence and sometimes attempt to persuade them not to talk about their experiences. Their immaculate black suits and cars have led some UFOlogists to believe the MIB are employed by a secret government agency. The MoD always claimed their 'UFO desk' dealt with all UFO matters and its civilian staff were not authorised to personally visit or interview witnesses. However, according to files released in 1998 another secret MoD branch, DI55, sometimes made 'extensive inquiries' of its own, details of which the 'UFO desk' had no 'need to know'.

Of particular interest to DI55 were UFO reports filed by police officers because of their perceived credibility and observation skills. Possibly the best documented investigation happened in 1966 when an intelligence officer travelled to Cheshire to interview a police constable, Colin Perks, who had reported sighting a 'flying saucer' (see Chapter 4). The officer also examined the scene and checked radar logs. Another visit occurred two years later following a 'flap' of UFO sightings in Sheffield, Yorkshire. Off-duty PC Martyn Johnson, then 25, was walking with his girlfriend near midnight on 22 July 1968 when they both saw two lights in the sky approaching them from a nearby park. Recalling the incident in 2011 he said: 'The colours that were coming off were all the colours of the rainbow… but they were very, very soft and didn't throw beams like a torch. They were moving slowly, following the contours of the park.' As the lights hovered above a nearby house the couple's poodle became agitated, broke its lead and ran off. The two lights then became

four, arranged in an oblong formation, but then ‘with no warning whatsoever, it was just like someone switched them off and it vanished at terrific speed, following the railway towards Rotherham’.

Police constable Martyn Johnson, in uniform circa 1966. PC Johnson was questioned by the officers from the MoD's Defence Intelligence Staff after he observed a UFO over High Hazels Park in Sheffield one night in July 1968.

Just a few hours later, PC Johnson was woken by his landlady and told to report to a senior officer at Sheffield police HQ. On arrival in the superintendent's office, he 'noticed two men sitting to his left… they stuck in my mind because they were dressed just like the spies on TV, in trench-coats and Trilby hats'. He was told the men were 'members of a Government investigation department in London' who wanted to quiz him about his experience. He was asked about other witnesses and whether he read books about space travel. 'There was no concern or pressure, it was all very relaxed, but the whole thing was so peculiar,' he recalls. 'They were desperately trying to convince me that it was an aircraft or possibly a helicopter. But I wasn't having any of it.' At the end of the interview he was reminded he was 'under oath and was sworn to secrecy for 25 years.' PC Johnson was baffled by the excessive secrecy because his story had made headlines in the local press. Then, just before the two men were due to return to London, he asked them what he had seen. 'They looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders,' he recalled. 'And one smiled and said to me – and his words are indelibly stamped on my memory all these years later – "What you have seen is an unidentified flying object or UFO. Some people call them spaceships, and if the people of the world knew how many genuine sightings there were like yours, there would be total panic."'[1]

A standard one-page MoD report form, containing brief details of PC Johnson's sighting, can be found in the UFO desk files, marked with one word in explanation: 'aircraft'.[2] The file notes that his report was referred to DI55, but there is no surviving written record of the visit from the two mysterious men from 'the government'.

THE CONDON REPORT

The last three years of the 1960s were a remarkable time for UFOlogists, as those who studied UFOs had become known. Hardly a day seemed to pass without a newspaper story about a new sighting somewhere in the country. Even that bastion of Britishness, the BBC, got in on the act with the documentary Flying Saucers and the People Who See Them, inspired by the 1967 UFO 'flap', as such panics had become known. Then in 1969, with UFOs already firmly embedded in popular culture, NASA's Apollo programme reached its apogee with the moon landings. Many people who had previously

scoffed at the idea of visitors from space began to reconsider. If we could visit the moon and possibly other planets why couldn't intelligent extraterrestrials, if they existed, visit us?

Heightened public awareness of UFOs posed an ongoing problem for the MoD, who were still struggling to talk down calls for a government-sponsored scientific study. In November 1967 the UFO desk head, James Carruthers, summarised their policy in a briefing for ministers. He said the MoD had kept a statistical analysis of reports received since 1959 but 'has found no evidence to suggest [UFOs] have other than mundane explanations.' He added that the MoD 'does not consider that a separate study by [UK] Government departments or by a university or other independent organisation would produce results to justify the expenditure, time and money involved'.[3]

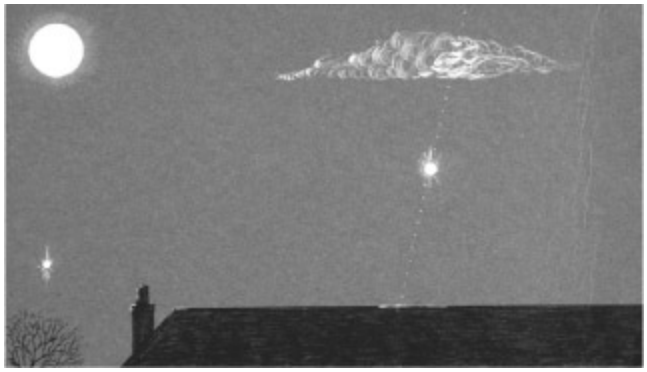
Meanwhile in the United States the study conducted by scientists at the University of Colorado, led by the physicist Dr Edward Condon, reached a series of conclusions and recommendations. What became known as the 'Condon report' was based upon the analysis of 12,618 reports investigated by Project Blue Book between 1947 and 1969. Of this total, around 6 per cent (701 sighting reports) remained 'unidentified'. Nevertheless, the study's conclusions stated that:

- About 90 per cent of all UFO reports prove to be plausibly related to ordinary phenomena, both natural and man-made.
- No UFO report had ever given any indication of a threat to national security.
- There was no evidence that sightings categorised as 'unexplained' were extraterrestrial spaceships.
- Little, if anything, had come from the study of UFOs in the past 21 years that had added to scientific knowledge, and further extensive study of UFO sightings was not justified.

These findings were later endorsed by a panel of the American National Academy of Sciences and following publication of the university's final report, The Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects, in 1969, the United States Air Force – which had commissioned the study – took the opportunity to close Blue Book and draw a line under their official interest in UFOs.

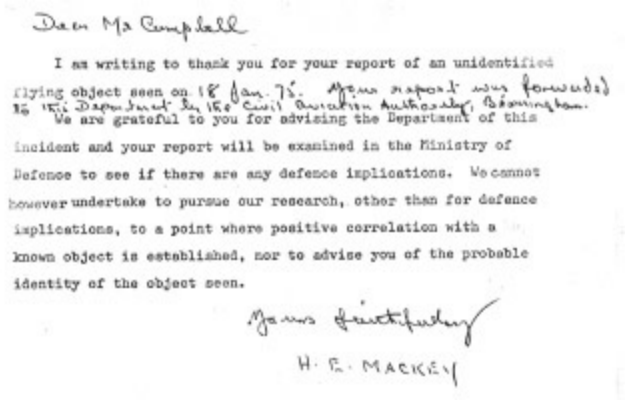
Britain followed the US's lead and few further reports, apart from those reported by members of the armed forces, were subject to the type of field

investigations undertaken by the MoD in 1967–8. The Condon report's conclusions were presented to the MoD in a briefing paper prepared by Michael Hobkirk, Carruther's successor as head of S4 (Air), early in 1970. This stated that although 'no evidence had been found to suggest that reports represent a threat, either terrestrial or extra terrestrial to the United Kingdom', the MoD should continue to scrutinise UFO reports. Hobkirk explained this was necessary not because the MoD were concerned about a potential threat from UFOs, but because 'of the need to answer questions from the public which might arise from a real anxiety about national security'.[4]



‘A delightful hand-coloured painting’ of a UFO sighted over Harborne, Birmingham, in January 1975, which prompted an exchange of letters with UFO desk personel. AIR 2/18961

Two years later, in January 1972, Hobkirk's successor, Air Commodore Anthony Davis, became the first head of the 'UFO desk' to appear on TV to explain how the ministry investigated sightings. The programme was part of the BBC's Man Alive series and included 'the man from the ministry' engaging in debate with a panel of experts and taking questions from the audience. The programme was filmed in Banbury town hall following a flap of UFO sightings in Oxfordshire. Initially the MoD were reluctant to allow Davis to take part as they worried he could become a target for those 'who profess to believe in little green men' but he was keen to participate. His appearance set an early precedent for officials such as Ralph Noyes and Nick Pope who would, decades later, speak publicly about the MoD's UFO policy. During the 1972 TV debate Davis said all reports received by the MoD were 'examined with an open mind and without prejudice' but their interest in them was 'limited to possible defence implications alone'. He denied the MoD possessed any evidence that could prove the existence of extraterrestrial visitors and said he had studied the US Condon report in 'great detail… and their conclusions are very similar to our own'. Although Davis was careful not to mention his own UFO experiences, two intriguing incidents are revealed in his briefing notes preserved at The National Archives. The first occurred when his RAF Spitfire was 'attacked head-on' by a mysterious flying object during an intruder mission over occupied Europe in 1944. He said this experience taught him a lesson as this wartime 'UFO' turned out to be a high altitude meteorological balloon. His second encounter occurred during the Cold War when his Venom night-fighter was ordered to intercept a UFO tracked on radar over RAF Lakenheath (see p. 67–9). By 1972 he had become a sceptic and told the BBC audience that 'beauty and UFOs, I often think, are in the eye of the beholder'.[5]



Dear Mr Campbell

I am writing to thank you for your report of an unidentified flying object seen on 18 Jan. 75. Your report was forwarded to the Department for Civil Aviation Authority, Birmingham.

We are grateful to you for advising the Department of this incident and your report will be examined in the Ministry of Defence to see if there are any defence implications. We cannot however undertake to pursue our research, other than for defence implications, to a point where positive correlation with a known object is established, nor to advise you of the probable identity of the object seen.

Yours faithfully

H. R. MACKEY

By the mid 1970s most reports sent to the MoD received a standard letter in reply. AIR 2/18961

Davis left the UFO desk in 1973 and in December of that year cuts in defence expenditure led the MoD to discontinue annual statistical analysis of UFO reports. Since the 1950s they had been allocating sightings, often in a haphazard fashion, to various explained categories, providing those who had contacted them with a brief summary of the MoD's assessment. With the subject categorised as a low priority, members of the public who reported sightings to the MoD would from now on receive a polite acknowledgement in the form of a standard letter outlining probable causes. These included aircraft, satellites and meteors, balloons, bright stars and planets, aside from the 10 per cent that would continue to be listed as 'unexplained'.

'LIKE A FLATTENED AVOCADO PEAR'

Despite the reduction in official interest, ordinary members of the public continued to report puzzling and sometimes frightening close encounters with UFOs to the authorities. In a letter sent to the MoD, Mrs Anne Taylor from Romford, Essex, described the strange experience that happened around 9.00 pm on 17 September 1973. She was returning to her farm after walking her three dogs when:

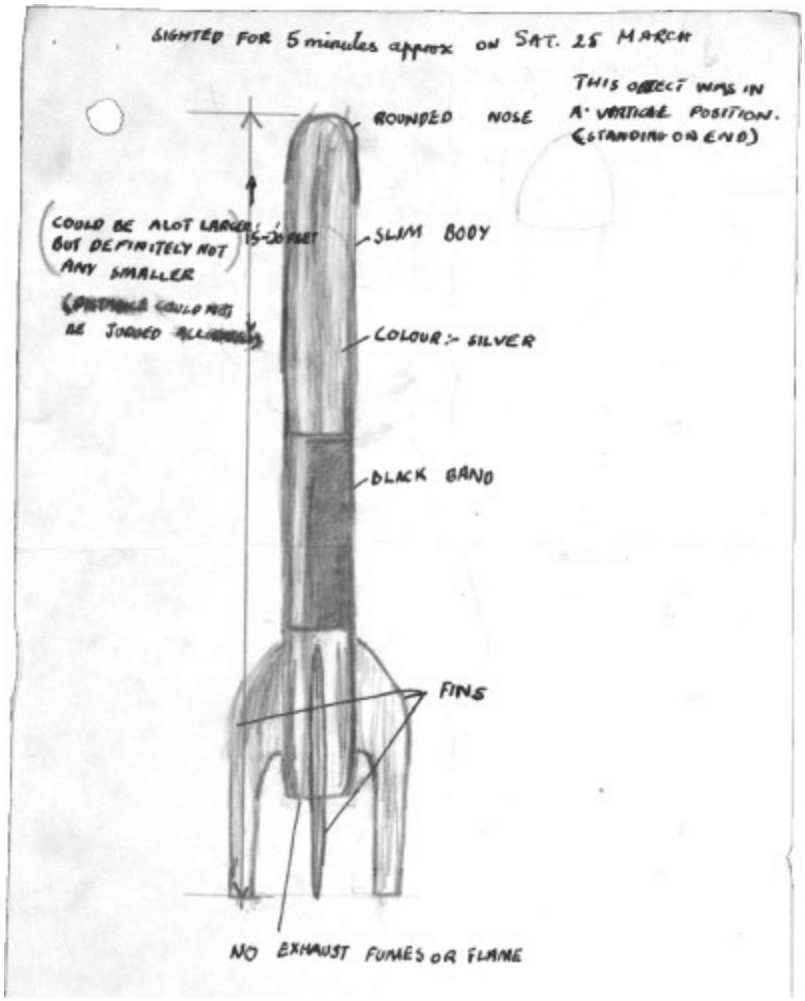
'I noticed a green light very near the cowshed. My first reaction was that this was one of the many light aircraft from nearby Stapleford Aerodrome, and that he was a bit low. I continued walking and watching this light, which started to move very slowly towards me. I then thought it was possibly a helicopter but suddenly realised there was no noise. By this time I had reached a line of trees with a thin wire fence dividing one field from another. The two terriers, who don't normally wander very far, were against my legs, whining and cringing.'

Mrs Taylor stopped, standing by one of the trees, and watched as the light kept coming slowly towards her until it was only a few feet from her, suspended some 12 ft from the ground. At this point 'I could then make out a ball-shaped outline, but no noise whatsoever. I whistled [for the Doberman] who came up to me, looked at the green light and started to howl. I looked at my watch and found it had stopped. Suddenly my spine started to tingle. I can't say that I was terrified; I think it was slight apprehension and certainly a great deal of curiosity. Next there was the sound of a jet plane in the distance; the green light went out and there was a sound which I can only describe as an electric whirring, and the ball went straight up until I could see it no more. As

soon as the light went out, the dogs returned to normal. I walked home, looked at my watch and it was going again.'[6]

Mrs Taylor guessed her sighting had taken place in the space of three minutes, adding: 'Let me assure you that I had not been drinking anything stronger than coffee and that I am not a reader of science fiction which this sounds rather like!'. On receiving her letter, a scientist at the Meteorological Office reached the same conclusions as one of his colleagues had in the cases of Peck and Hendry four years earlier (see p. 81); a belt of heavy thundery rain had passed over eastern England shortly before the sighting and there was, he believed, 'a possibility that Mrs Taylor witnessed an example of ball lightning… a rare and transient phenomenon which is not properly understood'. Several features of the experience were not, however, consistent with the theory: 'For example, ball lightning is usually described as white, red, yellow and uncommonly blue. Green has seldom been noted and the duration of the phenomenon is usually a matter of seconds rather than minutes.'

In other cases MoD scientists could be more confident about explanations for UFO reports sent in by members of the public. One example was reported to RAF St Mawgan by Mrs Good who saw three mysterious objects in the sky over Porthcothan Bay, Cornwall on the evening of 7 July 1973. She was closing the curtains of her house at 10.00 pm. It was still light outside and she was amazed to see two dark semi-cigar shaped objects hovering in the sky over the bay. These were positioned on either side of a glowing, symmetrical ring. After a few seconds, the ring appeared to enter the left object and the two 'shot off at terrific speed' upward and into the distance. Shortly afterwards the remaining object also disappeared, following the same path.


SIGHTED FOR 5 minutes approx ON SAT. 25 MARCH
THIS OBJECT WAS IN A VERTICAL POSITION. (STANDING ON END)
ROUNDED NOSE
(COULD BE A LOT LARGER; 15-20 FEET BUT DEFINITELY NOT ANY SMALLER
SLIM BODY
COLOUR :- SILVER
BLACK BAND
FINS
NO EXHAUST FUMES OR FLAME

A drawing depicting a UFO over Hampstead, north London, in March 1972 sighted by three teenaged boys. The drawing resembles Thunderbird 3 from the children's TV series Thunderbirds, originally shown in the mid-1960s. In a letter to the family, UFO desk officer G J Jameison said the boys were 'most likely observing an aircraft flying in circumstances unfamiliar to you… [such as] a climbing VC10, viewed from certain angle'. AIR 20/1205

On checking the date and time, RAF St Mawgan found their duty meteorological officer had seen a rare atmospheric phenomena known as 'sun dogs' or parhelia shortly before the sighting. The base commander concluded this offered 'a very credible explanation to her [UFO] sighting, although [it] was made one to two hours later than that of the Met Officer.' Mrs Good was far from convinced by this and remained sure of what she had seen. She wrote back, finishing her reply by saying 'I do realise it is one thing to be told of such things and another to see for yourself. I wonder if you were to see for yourself would anyone believe you?'.[7]

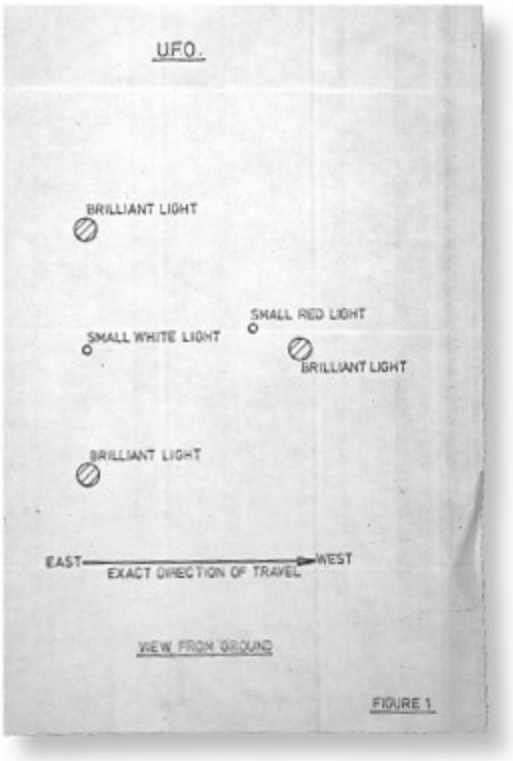
In 1977 the British Ambassador to Switzerland, A. K. Rothnie, sent a detailed account of his UFO experience near Rolvenden in Kent on 15 October. He was driving at 6.45 pm when: '… through my car windscreen I sighted to the north of me, somewhere near the spire of the church, an object in the sky at an inclination of some 18 or 20 percent above the horizon, travelling fast from south to north and shaped somewhat like a flattened avocado pear. The blunt and leading end seemed to be rimmed horizontally by some sort of phosphor or bronze metal which shone quite distinctly. The general body of the object was emitting a pronounced bluish light and from the tapering or trailing end there was a stream of golden sparks. The whole sighting took only a matter of one or one and a half seconds but my impression of what I had seen was so vivid that when a few minutes later I entered the Ewe and Lamb public house for a well-deserved pint of bitter (after a hard day's work in the garden) I immediately announced to the landlord that I had just seen my first UFO.'[8]

Mr Rothnie decided to report his sighting to the MoD after his local newspaper carried a story describing how groups of other people had seen 'a glowing mango-shaped UFO' at the same time. As this was a detailed report from a distinguished diplomat, the MoD had no option but to investigate further and DI55 scientists used a computer to check a range of possible explanations. In a letter Rothnie was told the MoD did not usually advise observers of the possible identity of the UFOs, but: 'the incident at Rolvenden has been examined rather more fully than usual and it has been established that debris from a Soviet space satellite entered the earth's atmosphere on 15th October. We cannot say definitely, but this is possibly the explanation.'[9]

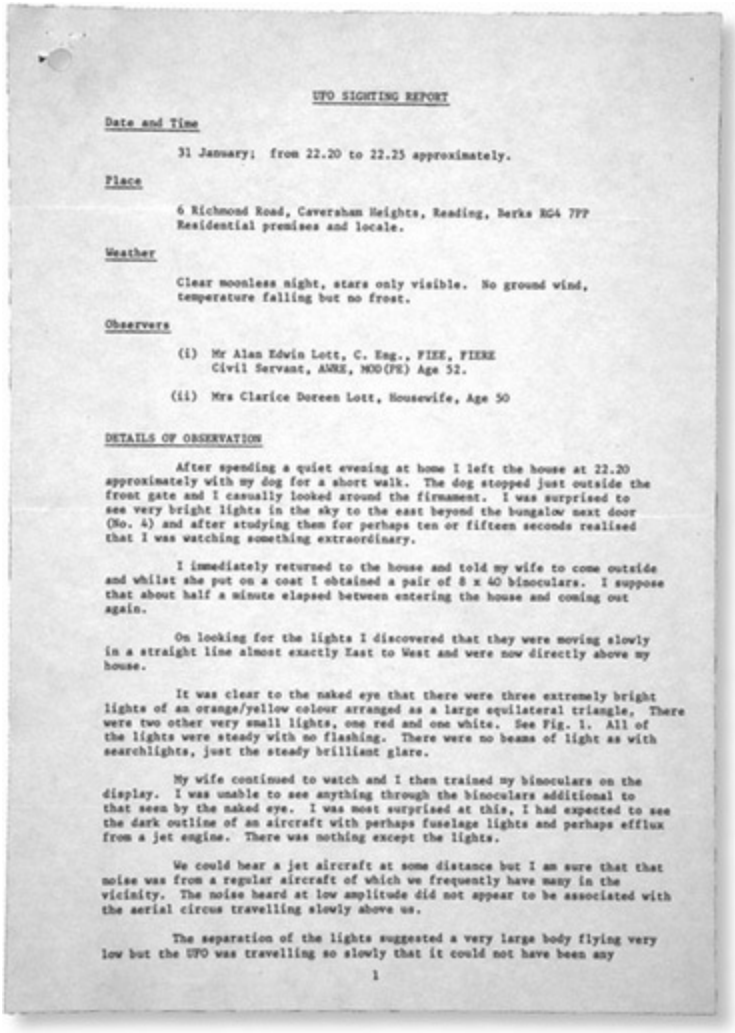
DANCING LIGHTS AND AN AERIAL CIRCUS

By the late 1970s the ambassador was unusual in receiving such a detailed response from the MoD. The majority of those who wrote in and whose letters can today be perused in The National Archives reading rooms would only have received a standard letter. Their reports, however sincere, were rarely investigated further. One example was a report submitted by civil servant Alan Lott, who worked at the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston. In his account he describes how he felt compelled to make an official report of 'an extraordinary sighting' made by himself and his wife, Clarice, on the night of 31 January 1975. Mr Lott had left his home in Caversham, near Reading, to walk their dog just before 10.30 pm when he spied a group of bright lights in the sky to the east over a neighbour's bungalow. He immediately called his wife and they both examined the lights through a pair of binoculars. Mr Lott's account continued: 'I discovered that they were moving slowly in a straight line almost exactly east to west and were now directly above my house. It was clear to the naked eye that there were three extremely bright lights of an orange/yellow colour arranged as a large equilateral triangle. There were two other very small lights, one red and one white… all steady with no flashing [and] there were no beams of light as with searchlights, just the steady brilliant glare.'[10]

The couple were puzzled at the lack of sound and could see no evidence of any outline of a fuselage that would be expected if the object was a low-flying aircraft. 'The separation of the light suggested a very large body flying very low but the UFO was travelling so slowly that it could not have been any conventional aircraft,' Mr Lott added. The formation of lights disappeared after five minutes, vanishing silently behind houses and trees further down the road. He ended his account by saying: 'In observing the UFO[s] one's first subjective impression was of an immense delta aircraft of the size of say a 747 flying at about 1,000 ft altitude and a speed of, say, 50 knots. However the three brilliant lights and the two small lights are not compatible with any type of aircraft known to me… I am quite unable to account in any way for this 'aerial circus'. It was quite unlike anything I have seen.'[11]



A diagram by civil servant Alan Lott showing the UFO that he and his wife saw outside their home in January 1975. AIR 2/18961



UFO SIGHTING REPORT

Date and Time

31 January; from 22.20 to 22.25 approximately.

Place

6 Richmond Road, Caversham Heights, Reading, Berks RG4 7PP
Residential premises and locale.

Weather

Clear moonless night, stars only visible. No ground wind, temperature falling but no frost.

Observers

(i) Mr Alan Edwin Lott, C. Eng., FIEE, FIERE
Civil Servant, AWRE, MOD(PE) Age 52.

(ii) Mrs Clarice Doreen Lott, Housewife, Age 50

DETAILS OF OBSERVATION

After spending a quiet evening at home I left the house at 22.20 approximately with my dog for a short walk. The dog stopped just outside the front gate and I casually looked around the firmament. I was surprised to see very bright lights in the sky to the east beyond the bungalow next door (No. 4) and after studying them for perhaps ten or fifteen seconds realised that I was watching something extraordinary.

I immediately returned to the house and told my wife to come outside and whilst she put on a coat I obtained a pair of 8 x 40 binoculars. I suppose that about half a minute elapsed between entering the house and coming out again.

On looking for the lights I discovered that they were moving slowly in a straight line almost exactly East to West and were now directly above my house.

It was clear to the naked eye that there were three extremely bright lights of an orange/yellow colour arranged as a large equilateral triangle, There were two other very small lights, one red and one white. See Fig. 1. All of the lights were steady with no flashing. There were no beams of light as with searchlights, just the steady brilliant glare.

My wife continued to watch and I then trained my binoculars on the display. I was unable to see anything through the binoculars additional to that seen by the naked eye. I was most surprised at this, I had expected to see the dark outline of an aircraft with perhaps fuselage lights and perhaps efflux from a jet engine. There was nothing except the lights.

We could hear a jet aircraft at some distance but I am sure that that noise was from a regular aircraft of which we frequently have many in the vicinity. The noise heard at low amplitude did not appear to be associated with the aerial circus travelling slowly above us.

The separation of the lights suggested a very large body flying very low but the UFO was travelling so slowly that it could not have been any

1

An extract from the detailed description of an ‘aerial circus’ observed over a suburb of Reading in January 1975, sent to MoD by a Alan Lott, an employee of the Atomic Weapons research base at Aldermaston. AIR 2/18961

Possibly the most bizarre story among the MoD's UFO files for the 1970s came from a young couple. They decided at the last moment to remove their names from the letter they sent to the MoD because they did not wish to be identified. The man described how he and his partially-sighted fiancé were returning home from a holiday in Cornwall late on 25 June 1977 to avoid holiday traffic. As they were driving along the deserted A303, near Warminster in Wiltshire, they noticed a triangle of three white lights ahead of them. 'My first conclusion was that they probably marked an obscured railway crossing or perhaps a low bridge,' he wrote. 'As they drew nearer, it became apparent that there was something singularly unusual in the glow that emitted from whatever object it was that I was gazing upon. I muttered to my fiancé, "look at these", and immediately became aware that she had seen the mysterious objects, which by this time were almost upon us. At this juncture, to my amazement the three objects broke away from their self-disciplined triangle and became three independent bodies. One then drifted away to the side of the road, to finally disappear into the bushes. The remaining two then ranged themselves alongside the car, very much to my fiancé's disquiet and consternation. Then the most amazing thing of all occurred. The objects, which danced with elf-like impishness alongside us, gently and with a "bubble-blowing like action" changed both their colour and shape. From the centre of the white light an orange/golden like globe emerged… these two globes… dwelt for a short space of time alongside the car and then moved to the rear, where I picked them up in my rear-view mirror as they continued to dance along behind us, before they soon disappeared.'[12]

The letter-writer added: 'My reactions were only of surprise – certainly not fear – [and] at no stage was there an atmosphere of anything in the least bit unwelcome or sinister – so that I was able to view that which took place with a large degree of detachment and with considerable fascination.'[13]

THE WELSH ROSWELL

One of the best-known UFO mysteries of the 1970s has become known as 'the Berwyn Mountains incident'. On the evening of 23 January 1974 many people across England and Wales sighted brilliant coloured lights streaking across the sky. Astronomers at Leicester University recorded sightings of at least three fireball meteors between 7.00 pm and 10.00 pm that night. Fireballs are bright meteors that fly close to the Earth's atmosphere, forming vivid bursts of colour

as they burn up in the atmosphere, leaving a trail of sparks in their wake.

One of these fireballs was seen over North Wales just minutes before a huge explosion shook villages below the northern slopes at the foot of the Berwyn Mountains. For many who saw lights in the sky and experienced the earth tremor, not knowing their source, it appeared that something, perhaps a plane, had crashed. Police switchboards were jammed with calls and, as the Berwyns had been the scene of earlier military jet crashes, police and a mountain rescue team were sent out in case a real disaster had taken place. The team from RAF Valley was sent to Llandrillo at the foot of the range and joined local police to search the mountains the following day. They found no trace of a crash and the operation was called off when they learned the British Geological Survey had identified the source of the 'explosion' as an earthquake, measured at between 4 and 5 on the Richter scale, with its epicentre in the Bala area.[14]

The Berwyn event received a great deal of media coverage but was not directly linked with UFOs at the time. When it became clear the meteor shower and the earth tremor were unrelated, other than by coincidence, the story was quickly forgotten. However, by 1996–97 the popularity of the Roswell incident in books and TV documentaries led some UFO enthusiasts to resurrect the Berwyn event as a possible example of a UFO crash covered up by the authorities – a 'Welsh Roswell'. In common with the original Roswell (see p. 32), in these later accounts, witnesses, often anonymous, were quoted decades after the actual events. Some claimed roads leading to the Welsh hillsides had been closed off by the army whilst teams searched for the crash site, while others alleged that alien bodies had been retrieved and taken for examination at the secret Porton Down biological weapons plant in Wiltshire.[15]

Despite numerous claims and counter-claims no evidence has ever emerged of any high level MoD involvement in the Berwyn incident apart from the initial search by the RAF mountain rescue team. Rumours that claimed mysterious officials arrived in Llandrillo and interviewed residents have been traced back to a subsequent field survey by scientists from the British Geological Survey.

The MoD files contain accounts of seven UFOs sighted on the evening of 23 January 1974, but none of these were reported from Wales. The sightings were made in the Home Counties, Lincolnshire and Sussex. Most described a bright greenish light high in the northwest that appeared to fall towards the horizon. One observer in Lincoln said the object appeared to break up, followed by a

brilliant flash of green light. According to the files, observers recorded the time as just before 10.00 pm, which coincides with the last and most dramatic of the fireballs recorded by astronomers.[16]

In May 1974 Welsh MP Dafyd Ellis Thomas asked Defence Minister Brynmor John if any official investigation was made into the Berywn incident. Files released at The National Archives in 2005 show the MoD consulted the Meteorological Office and DI55 who said the meteor display was the most likely explanation for what had been seen in North Wales. The MP was told that 'no official enquiry' was made by the MoD other than the initial search by the RAF Valley mountain rescue team, which found nothing.[17]

UFOS OVER THE NORTH SEA

Of all UFO sightings, those reported by police officers or military witnesses and corroborated by radar contacts tend to provide the most impressive evidence for the existence of UFOs. One of the most puzzling reports in the MoD files for this period was made by personnel at RAF Boulmer, which is an air defence radar station on the northeast coast near Alnwick, Northumberland. In the early hours of 30 July 1977 airmen on the night shift were alerted by a call from a civilian who could see two bright objects hovering over the North Sea. When the duty controller Flight Lieutenant A. M. Wood and a group of airmen emerged from the control room they realised that they too could see the mysterious objects. In a signal sent to the MoD, Wood described them as being close to the shore and hovering at a height estimated at 4,000–5,000 ft. They appeared to slowly move apart and then back together as they climbed into the clear sky. His report said: 'No imagination was required to distinguish the shape… westerly object [was] conical with apex at top… [it] seemed to rotate and change shape to become arrowhead in shape. The easterly object was indistinct.' Wood said the UFO closest to the base was 'round, luminous, [and] 4 to 5 times larger than a Whirlwind helicopter'.[18]

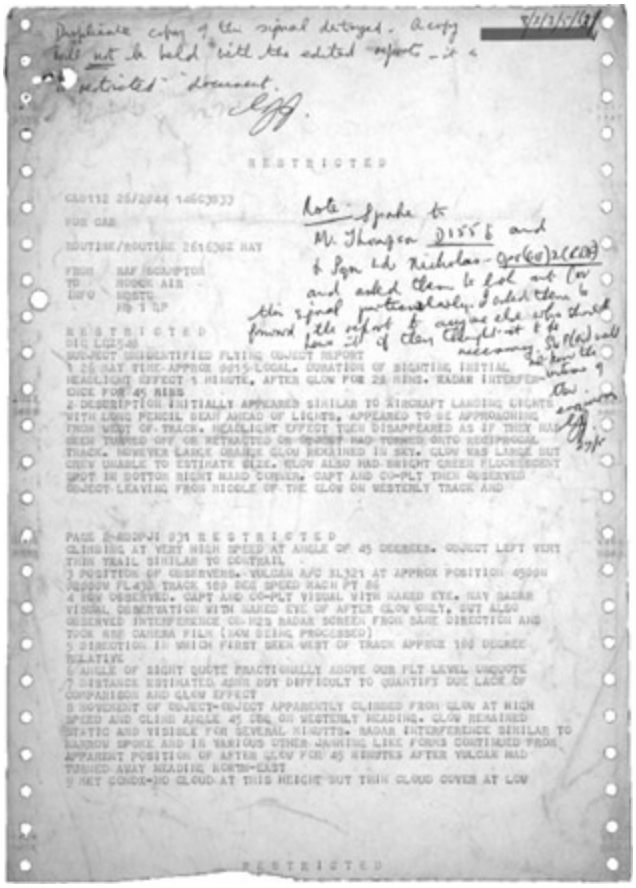
Flight Lieutenant Wood's story was corroborated by two airmen on duty at a picket post on the base perimeter, who were described as 'reliable and sober'. Incredibly, they said the westerly UFO moved 'and changed shape to become body shaped with projections like arms and legs'. In his report Wood says that shortly after they disappeared from sight, two unidentified targets were detected on RAF Boulmer's radars at a range of between 20 and 30 miles out

to sea. These slowly moved northeast as they climbed, ‘then parted, one climbing to 9,000 ft [estimated] and moving east, the other holding 5–6,000 ft’. Wood contacted the controller at RAF Patrington, a second radar station some miles to the south near Flamborough in Yorkshire. Personnel there said they could also see two targets on the radar screens.

A senior intelligence officer commented on this incident when I interviewed him in 2005. He said he was left ‘infuriated’ at the lack of an immediate response to Boulmer’s report by the RAF, despite the wealth of evidence. The UFOs were visible for 1 hour 40 minutes and this fact led him to suspect the UFOs might have been drifting balloons or even bright stars, but he felt an opportunity had been missed to resolve the mystery. He added: ‘I sent a rocket to the [Commanding Officer] demanding to know why they hadn’t scrambled an aircraft to see what it was.’[19]

VULCAN CREW ENCOUNTER UFO

The RAF Boulmer incident was one of the more intriguing sightings from the 1970s that emerged when the MoD released its files to The National Archives. Perhaps the most amazing of all, however, is that made by the entire crew of a Vulcan bomber based at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire. According to a restricted signal dated 26 May 1977, the captain and his four crewmen were on a training flight 43,000 ft over the North Atlantic when they saw a strange lighted object some 40 nautical miles distant. The UFO appeared to track them for around 15 minutes whilst turning onto the same course slightly above them. At first the UFO resembled an aircraft’s landing lights, ‘with a long pencil beam of light ahead’, but as it turned towards them the lights appeared to go out leaving a diffuse orange glow with a bright fluorescent green spot in the bottom right-hand corner. Then suddenly, both the captain and co-pilot saw an object ‘leaving from the middle of the glow on a westerly track… climbing at very high speed at an angle of 45 degrees’.[20]



Duplicate copy of the signal destroyed. A copy will not be held with the edited report - it is a "retained" document.

RESTRICTED

Note. Spoke to Mr. Thompson D1556 and & Sqn Ldr Nicholas-Grp(A6)2(CCB) and asked them to find out for this signal particularly. I asked them to forward the report to anyone else who they knew it if they thought it to be necessary. Sir P(A) will be kept informed of progress.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

A signal from RAF Scampton reporting a Vulcan bomber's extraordinary UFO sighting over the North Atlantic in May 1977. DEFE 71/34

As they continued to scan the sky, the bomber crew detected interference on their radar screen, originating from the same direction the UFO was seen. This continued for 45 minutes as the Vulcan turned back towards the British Isles. On its return to RAF Waddington, the camera film from the aircraft's radar was examined by experts. This confirmed the Vulcan's radar had recorded a 'strong response' from the direction of the sighting. It appeared to consist of three separate radar returns at varying distances, the third made up of three targets all 200 yds wide. On the film the UFO appeared as 'an elongated shadow', indicating an object of 'large size' at a similar height to the Vulcan.

An intelligence summary sent to the MoD later the same day said the crew 'were unable to offer a logical explanation for the sighting' but noted that foreign shipping was present in the area and the interference evident on the radar suggested an attempt had been made to jam the Vulcan's instruments. The signal, marked 'restricted', said the description resembled 'surface or sub-surface launched missile firing' perhaps by American or Soviet forces. When the UFO desk passed the report on to DI55 for further investigation they were informed that it would 'not know the outcome of their inquiries' due to the report's sensitive content.

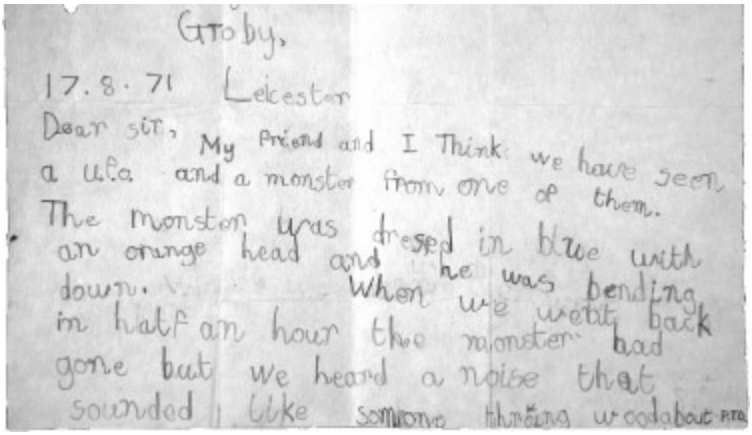
THE WELSH TRIANGLE

By now, as the UFO mystery evolved in complexity, the idea was beginning to arise that some places were more prone to visits from UFOs and their occupants than others. In the 1960s, for example, Warminster, a small town on the edge of the Army training grounds at Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, became Britain's first UFO hotspot or 'window'. The strange sighting of 'impish' moving lights described earlier (see p. 90) was reported in this area of Wiltshire, which would later become a focus for the crop circle mystery (see p. 117).

The Warminster phenomenon actually began when residents reported a rash of strange aerial noises and mysterious lights in the sky during the Christmas holidays of 1965. Within two years the town was overwhelmed at weekends and bank holidays by crowds of UFOlogists who took up positions on surrounding hills to watch for 'The Thing', as it was described by the town's residents. Hundreds of sightings were logged by a local journalist, Arthur Shuttlewood, who claimed to have observed numerous flying objects in and around the town. Enthusiasm for skywatching at Warminster had, however,

ebbed away by the late 1970s when media attention moved to a new UFO hotspot on the rugged coastline of West Wales.

The West Wales flap began at lunchtime on 4 February 1977 when 15 children at Broad Haven Primary School announced they had watched a silver cigar-shaped UFO land in fields behind the building. Some of the group, aged 9 to 11 years, claimed they saw a silver man with pointed ears emerge from the craft. These stories were initially put down to a combination of over-active imaginations and too much television, but the children were so adamant they had seen something unusual that their teachers were moved to hand in a petition at the police station. Their school's headteacher later asked them to draw the UFO and was amazed at how similar their pictures were.



Toby,
17.8.71 Leicester
Dear sir, My friend and I think we have seen a ufo and a monster from one of them. The monster was dressed in blue with an orange head and he was bending down. When we went back in half an hour the monster had gone but we heard a noise that sounded like someone throwing wood about

A letter sent to MoD in 1971 by seven-year-old Colin Davis from Leicester describing his sighting of ‘a UFO and a monster’. DEFE 24/1206

Here Welsh UFO enthusiast and veterinary surgeon Randall Jones Pugh was, like Arthur Shuttlewood, instrumental in bringing a local story to the attention of the national media. Journalists and TV crews flocked to the Welsh coast from across the country and flying saucers were soon the main topic of conversation in the principality. By May, straightforward lights in the sky had been replaced by stories of giant humanoid figures in spacesuits, similar to those used by Apollo astronauts, who had been seen prowling around remote parts of the Welsh countryside late at night.

Details of these strange happenings were chronicled in three books, one of which, The Welsh Triangle by Peter Paget, had been partly inspired by a headline in the Sun newspaper, 'Spaceman Mystery of the Terror Triangle'. The idea of UFO sightings and other strange phenomena being linked up to form a 'triangle' when plotted on a map was a direct outcome of popular fascination with the 'Bermuda Triangle', made famous by a book of that name published in 1974. Author Charles Berlitz invented the term as shorthand for an area of the western Atlantic between Bermuda and Florida where he claimed 'over 1,000 people and 100 aeroplanes have vanished without trace'. The disappearance of aircraft and people had become a popular theme in UFO literature since the death of United States Air Force Captain Mantell in 1948 (see p. 36), and the idea of a 'zone of terror' appealed to the tabloid media. What exactly constituted the Welsh version of the Bermuda Triangle was never entirely clear, but according to various books and tabloid articles it included most of the southeast corner of St Bride's Bay along with the towns of Milford Haven and Haverfordwest.

Opinion was divided on what was responsible for the Welsh UFO flap. Could it be as journalist Hugh Turnbull, who worked for the local weekly newspaper, the Western Telegraph, came to suspect, 'something military'? A more extreme version, favoured by Paget, was that aliens had established an underground base beneath the Stack Rocks in St Bride's Bay, where UFOs had been seen to hover and disappear. In fact within a 20-mile radius of Broad Haven, where many of the sightings occurred, there actually were a number of sensitive military bases. To the north was the rocket testing station at Aberporth, while RAF Brawdy, near St David's, trained pilots and housed both a Tactical Weapons Unit and a US Navy research station.

THE SILVER SPACEMEN

As press coverage continued, demands grew for an official inquiry into the West Wales UFO mystery. Rosa Granville, proprietor of the Haven Fort Hotel at Little Haven, wrote to her MP, Nicholas Edwards, to ask the Ministry of Defence to investigate a UFO experience that left her 'greatly agitated and disturbed'. According to her letter, in the early hours of 19 April 1977 she was disturbed by a strange humming noise and, on looking out of her window, saw an oval-shaped object 'like the moon falling down' land behind her home in St Bride's Bay. As she watched in amazement two very tall human-like figures appeared in front of the UFO that was about the size of a mini-bus. The figures had blank faces and pointed heads and wore white outfits like boiler suits. They appeared to 'take measurements or gather things' and climbed a grassy bank in the field. When she returned to the window after calling members of her family both the object and the 'humanoid' figures had vanished.

Within days of the MP's intervention the MoD asked Squadron Leader J. A. Cowan, who was the Community Relations Officer at RAF Brawdy, to visit the town. According to a report dated 3 June 1977 he examined the area indicated by Mrs Granville 'which is in a field adjacent to a Royal Observer Corps underground monitoring post but could find no evidence of a landing'. He added: 'I can offer no explanation of [this] sighting but can confirm that it is not connected with the operations of RAF Brawdy.' Squadron Leader Cowan also discounted the idea that secret military activities were responsible for what the press called 'the Broad Haven Triangle'. He thought it was more likely some of the sightings were caused by 'the high level of flying activity that is generated by the military and civil airfields and to a lesser extent the Royal Aircraft Establishments; the area is also overflown by trans-atlantic aircraft'.[21] RAF Brawdy had also received several calls describing 'men in silver suits' and an official noted that 'it is perhaps not irrelevant that a local factory manufactures protective clothing of this type for the oil installation at Milford Haven. One of these "silver suits" is also on display in a shop at Brawdy village.'

Suspecting a prankster was at work, the then head of the UFO desk, John Peduzie, took the unusual step of asking the Provost & Security Service (P&SS) to begin a 'discreet enquiry' into events in Wales. The Provost & Security Service are the RAF's police force and are also responsible for the investigation of complaints about low-flying aircraft. In his letter to them Peduzie wrote: 'We have not invoked the assistance of P&SS before on UFOs… and the last thing I want to do is involve you in extraneous problems

which would divert you from your more immediate work.' He asked them to assess 'the volume of local interest and/or alarm and whether there is a readily discernable rational explanation, or whether there is prima facie evidence for a more serious specialist enquiry'. Peduzie went to some length to emphasise his request must be treated in confidence, adding: 'I have not even told the Minister I am consulting you.'[22]

Due to the discreet nature of this inquiry, no final report on the Welsh UFO mystery has survived, but in December 1977, in a briefing on UFO policy submitted to the MoD's Defence Intelligence Staff, Mr Peduzie wrote: 'There is always a steady public interest in UFOs and from time to time it tends to increase unaccountably… [In the summer] there was some concern in Wales, although the RAF Police thought this could have been the work of a practical joker.'[23] In 1996 this suspicion was confirmed when one of the men involved confessed in an interview with the Western Mail newspaper. He said the spaceman outfit 'had a solid in-built helmet so I would have looked about 7ft tall. Alien sightings were all the rage so I took a stroll around for a bit of fun.'[24]

One of a number of crayon drawings showing a UFO sighted by children from the playground of Upton Primary Junior School at Macclesfield in Cheshire in 1977. Their teacher sent the drawings to the MoD. DEFE 24/1206

Nevertheless, the sighting by the Broad Haven schoolchildren that triggered the Welsh UFO flap has never been adequately explained and the witnesses, now adults, continued to stick by their stories when interviewed for a TV documentary in 2008. The MoD's files reveal they were not the only schoolchildren to see UFOs during that year. At 2.45 pm on 4 October 1977 a group of 10 children, aged from 7 to 11 years, spotted something strange hovering between two trees whilst they were in the playground of Upton Primary Junior School in Macclesfield, Cheshire. Their teacher immediately separated them and asked them to draw what they had seen. She, like her counterparts at Broad Haven, was so astonished at the remarkable consistency of the drawings that she passed them to the police. They took the report seriously and checks were made with Manchester Airport who found nothing unusual had been detected by their radar. A letter sent to the children's teacher by the MoD thanked her for sending the drawings and then reassured her with the standard words that: 'simple explanations are found for the great majority of UFO reports, the most common single source of sightings being aircraft or the lights of aircraft seen under unusual conditions. Investigations over a number of years have so far produced no evidence that UFOs represent a threat to the air defences of this country.'[25]

WE ARE NOT ALONE – SPIELBERG'S UFOS ARRIVE

Opinion polls show that 1978 marked the high water mark for belief in UFOs as extraterrestrial spacecraft. A Gallup survey that year found around half of all Americans believed in some form of extraterrestrial life and 57 per cent thought UFOs were 'real', with 9 per cent reporting a personal sighting. These figures reflect high public awareness of the subject created by the release of Steven Spielberg's science fiction film Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The film, with a $19 million budget, opened in UK cinemas during February 1978. The plot involves benevolent aliens who slowly make their presence known to world governments and selected individuals via escalating UFO flaps. This build-up culminates in a final spectacular landing and contact hidden from the public by an ingenious cover-up by the US government. The plot, though fictional, seemed to reflect what many thousands believed was really going on and the overlap between fact and fiction was underlined by the presence of former Project Blue Book consultant astronomer Dr J. Allen Hynek as Spielberg's consultant. Hynek had coined the phrase 'close

encounters' to describe categories of UFO experience, with the 'third kind' involving sightings of alien creatures such as those reported in Wales during 1977.

The effect of the film on UFO reports in Britain was dramatic. Files at The National Archives show the number of sighting reported to the MoD during 1978 reached a record-breaking 750, almost double the figure for 1977 and the highest total on record. When the Daily Express set up a UFO reporting bureau to coincide with the film's release, hundreds more came forward to describe experiences they had never spoken about publicly before. Others simply 'saw' the fantastic craft from the film for themselves. In July, a man from Ealing Common in London rang the MoD to report 'a gigantic saucer' lit up with coloured lights, 'just like a scene from Close Encounters of the Third Kind'. It seemed, he said, echoing the compulsive feelings experienced by characters in Spielberg's film, 'as if I was meant to see this object'.[26]

Memories of 1978–9 are dominated by the economic crisis and industrial chaos that eventually swept the Labour government from power. During what became known as the 'winter of discontent' there was one moment when the gloomy headlines were replaced by exciting news of dramatic UFO sightings across the world. The night of 31 December 1978 was cold and clear, and across the British Isles people were out of doors bringing in the New Year. A few minutes after 7.00 pm many hundreds were amazed to see a bright light with a long trail behind it streaking across the heavens on a northwest to southeast path. In the space of just a couple of hours the MoD received a total of 120 separate sighting reports and civilian UFO groups received hundreds more. The source of this spectacular flap was quickly identified by the RAF's early warning base at Fylingdales in North Yorkshire as the re-entry into Earth's atmosphere of a booster rocket that had launched a Russian satellite, Cosmos 1068, into orbit on Boxing Day. The rocket burned up over northern Europe, with pieces falling to the ground in Germany.

Although most observers gave a sound description of the New Year's Eve UFO, a few provided wildly inaccurate details, particularly of its size and altitude. Exact estimation of the height of an object in the dark sky is extremely difficult, if not impossible. For example, some observers believed the object was as low as 1,000 ft, when in reality it was many miles above the Earth. Others gave a time for their sighting that was one hour or more in error. Several described what they had seen in imaginative terms, for example

‘cigar-shaped, very bright, with lighted windows’ (Manchester), ‘similar to a German V-2 rocket’ (Bradford) and ‘train-shaped, 120 ft long tapering at the front with 40 plus bright lights all along the side’ (Newmarket). A few refused to believe the UFO was a Russian rocket at all. One, who served five years in the RAF, said he was familiar ‘with meteors and re-entry of space debris [and] found it difficult to accept the [MoD’s] explanation for this occurrence’.[27]

No sooner had this story died away when news broke of a remarkable film that showed UFOs following a freighter aircraft above the east coast of New Zealand. The film was shot by a camera crew from an Australian TV station who joined the flight after hearing news of an earlier sighting by the crew of an Argosy plane flying between south and north islands a week earlier. Dramatic images from the New Year’s Eve footage were shown on TV news across the world the following day and quickly became a media sensation. The pilot of the aircraft involved in the second incident, Bill Startup, had more than 20 years’ flying experience. He said the mysterious lights appeared just before midnight as the Argosy hugged the coast of South Island near Kaikoura, on a flight from Wellington to Christchurch. Startup described the lights as behaving in an intelligent, playful manner similar to the accounts of ‘foo-fighters’ described by wartime pilots in Europe and the Pacific (see p. 16). He was quoted as saying: ‘[The UFO] appeared to stay still until we got within ten miles then it turned with us as I changed course… it then went above us and circled and came down beneath us. It was making definite movements in relation to [the plane].’[28] Further evidence in support of the crew’s story was provided by air traffic controllers at Wellington Airport, who reported unusual targets tracking the aircraft on both nights, some of which tallied with the visual sightings.

UFOS IN THE HOUSE OF LORDS

These developments were welcomed by a prominent UFOlogist, Lord Clancarty (Brinsley le Poer Trench) who was busy writing a speech for what was to become a historic debate in the ornate setting of the British House of Lords. Questions about UFO sightings and government investigations had been tabled in the Commons as early as 1953, but the motion Clancarty intended to present in the Upper Chamber was unique in being the first full debate on UFOs held in the British Parliament. Clancarty had become fascinated by UFOs early in the 1950s and helped to found the magazine Flying Saucer

Review, which he edited from 1956–9. With his stock in UFOlogy rising he went on to found his own organisation, Contact International, in 1966 and wrote seven books on UFOs and 'ancient astronauts', whom he believed had visited Earth millions of years ago. In a BBC TV interview during 1977, he expanded on this belief by claiming aliens had established bases inside the Earth and their flying saucers entered the atmosphere by flying out from holes in the poles. The ever-so-British eccentricity displayed by Clancarty in his TV appearances is equally evident in the transcript of the UFO debate preserved in Hansard.

Lord Clancarty had succeeded his half brother as 8th Earl in 1976 and immediately used his seat in the Lords to pressurise the government on the issue. His elevation to the Lords added to the problems faced by the Ministry of Defence who anticipated he would use the opportunity to ask the government to make a public statement about UFOs. In December 1977, with assistance from the Foreign Office, the MoD used its influence to talk down a call by another highly placed UFO enthusiast. This was Sir Eric Gairy, who was president of the small Caribbean island republic of Grenada, a member of the British Commonwealth.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)

HOUSE OF LORDS
OFFICIAL REPORT

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HER MAJESTY'S STATIONERY OFFICE
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A copy of the Hansard publication covering the historic House of Lords UFO debate, tabled by Lord Clancarty and held in January 1979 at the height of the Winter of Discontent.

Gairy wanted the United Nations to set up an international agency or department to conduct UFO research, but Britain's diplomats at the UN refused to sanction such a move. Records show one official described this as 'a ridiculous proposal that will only bring the United Nations into disrepute'.[29] Gairy withdrew his original proposal but continued his campaign for a full debate, calling on the UN General Assembly to make 1978 'the year of the UFO'. Gairy was at the UN in New York pressing for further UN action on UFOs early in the following year when he was deposed by a military coup in Grenada.

Meanwhile the dramatic events unfolding in the southern hemisphere led the Royal New Zealand Air Force to launch its own UFO inquiry. To quell public concern, they sent out a squadron of Orion aircraft for a seven-hour UFO hunt three days after the New Year sightings. They investigated 14 separate unidentified radar targets seen by air traffic control radar, but nothing was found. A copy of the air force's draft report was sent by the British High Commission in Wellington to DI55 officials in London, who were preparing the MoD's response to Lord Clancarty in the Lords. This said radars at Wellington Airport had been plagued by 'spurious returns' for some time and during the New Year period 'atmospheric conditions [were] conducive to freak propagation of radio and light waves'.

The UFOs seen by the aircrew were, it decided, probably caused by the lights of squid boats distorted by unusual atmospheric conditions or the planet Venus which 'was rising in the eastern sky at this time of the year and is unusually bright in appearance' (in fact Venus did not rise above the horizon until 3.15 am, over one hour after the sightings). The report concluded, in lieu of a more detailed scientific study that: 'almost all the sightings can be explained by natural but unusual phenomena.'[30]

Lord Clancarty had originally intended his UFO debate to be held in June 1978 but his motion was withdrawn at the last minute because he feared poor attendance before the summer recess. When it was re-tabled later that year, Patrick Stevens of the UFO desk warned colleagues at Whitehall: 'We do not take this lightly because Lord Clancarty is an acknowledged expert on UFOs, whilst MoD has no experts on UFOs' adding the sarcastic caveat, 'for much the same reasons as we have no experts on levitation or black magic.' With public interest in the subject higher than ever he warned colleagues there was now a real risk the government would be persuaded to conduct the dreaded study of

UFOs, ‘or at least to examine the mass of evidence that Lord Clancarty and his fellow UFOlogists have assembled in the last 30 years.’ And he added: ‘Should the Government’s defences break, I need hardly warn you that responsibility for the study could very likely fall on [our] department!’.[31]

Steven’s research revealed there had never been any British ‘scientific study of UFOs’ and he had to rely upon the combined expertise of military and scientific advisers during his preparation for the debate. One of the most revealing briefings came from Group Captain Neil Colvin, a senior officer overseeing the RAF’s air defences. He told Stevens: ‘Of the [UFO] reports reviewed to date we can find no evidence of extraterrestrial visitation to either earth, its atmosphere or near space,’ but he was reluctant to dismiss the entire phenomenon as nonsense. ‘The almost total lack of primary radar observations of unnatural phenomena leads us to be sceptical of Lord Clancarty’s claims,’ Colvin wrote, ‘although we would not wish to state categorically that “UFOs” do not exist.’

The task of speaking for the government in the Lords debate fell upon Lord Strabolgi (David Kenworthy), who was Labour’s chief whip in the Upper Chamber. After six months of preparation, Stevens recommended the government adopted ‘an unequivocal and uncompromising line’ on UFOs but after much internal debate the MoD agreed to remain open-minded, taking the line ‘that there really are strange phenomena in the sky, but there is no need to introduce the highly questionable hypothesis of alien space craft.’

The debate arrived on 18 January 1979 in the middle of a national strike, but the industrial crisis did nothing to dampen interest in UFOs. It was one of the best attended ever held in the Lords, with 60 peers and hundreds of onlookers, including several famous UFOlogists, present in the public gallery. Lord Clancarty opened the three-hour session at 7.00 pm ‘to call attention to the increasing number of sightings and landings on a world wide scale of UFOs, and to the need for an intra-governmental study of UFOs’. He wound up his speech by calling upon the government to reveal what they knew about the phenomenon and asked the Minister of Defence, Fred Mulley, to give a national TV broadcast on the issue in the same way his French counterpart, Robert Galley, had done in 1974.[32]

More than a dozen peers, including two eminent retired scientists, made contributions to the debate. Lord Hewlett was briefed by Sir Bernard Lovell, director of the Jodrell Bank radio telescope in Cheshire, which had searched

the skies 24 hours every day for the past 30 years. Jodrell was the first to detect the Russian satellite Sputnik in 1957 and ‘has observed thousands of possible subjects for identification as UFOs, but not a single one has proved other than natural phenomena’. He added: ‘Of the thousands of reports of sightings that have been made, whenever it has been possible to make an investigation they have been found to be natural phenomena or in some instances, I regret to say, pure myth.’

1287 *Unidentified* [LORDS] *Flying Objects* 1288

[Lord Gainford.]

receive every possible encouragement to take part in many debates in the future. My main contribution to this debate is to assure the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, of any support that I can give. If we are going to have a study group in your Lordships' House I shall be glad to be a volunteer to take part whenever I have the opportunity. I also thank him and others for initiating this debate, and for the pleasure of having such a refreshing subject to discuss in the midst of the present period of crices and strikes.

I am the 10th person to speak in this debate. I have noticed that so far none of your Lordships have actually reported a sighting, so here goes! I am going to stick my neck out, open my big mouth and trust I am not going to put my foot in it! I saw a UFO a little while ago. It was on 31st December about 8 p.m. All right, my Lords, have a good laugh, it was Hogmanay! Up in Argyll it was a New Year's Eve party and somebody said there was something funny flying across the sky. Fifteen of us came out to have a look, including some children. They had been drinking soft drinks anyway! The object was like a bright white ball with a touch of red followed by a white cone. In fact the whole object had the appearance of a small comet. It was heading eastwards and seemed rather low in the sky, passing over the hills between Loch Sweyne and Loch Fyne. The position from which we viewed it was outside the village of Tayvallich in Argyllshire on the West coast of Scotland about the same latitude as Glasgow.

As the ball disappeared into the distance it seemed to divide into two parts. It may have been a comet or a meteorite, but I should like to know what it really was. It would have been very beneficial if there had been some sort of centre to which I could write or telephone to report such an incident. No doubt setting up such an organisation would be an invitation to pranks, but for starting such a centre I suggest that volunteers could readily be found from the ranks of the former Civil Defence Service and/or the Royal Observer Corps. The Royal Observer Corps still exists but it has literally, if not metaphorically, gone underground where it is preparing to report and advise on nuclear fallout in the case of war. But there are many who used to serve it and who have not yet disappeared from the scene who could make valuable use of their past experience in establishing centres in various districts throughout the country—and I do not suggest that we start opening up the old observer posts in the countryside—to receive and analyse any reported sightings from the public. Such people with a sense of responsibility could, with a little experience, sift the genuine reports from the false.

Suggesting that such an organisation be set up, particularly at times like these, can naturally give rise to a protest about the waste of public money; but volunteers who might be willing to work for a few hours are quite prepared to do it for very small remuneration, if any at all. I have mentioned the Civil Defence Service, and I did not know whether or not I should declare an interest, but I was a member of it during the 'sixties and I was one of many who were bitterly disappointed when it had to go into abeyance. I recall particularly the comradeship and the sense that we were doing a useful job for the community.

If I had the time and opportunity, I should enjoy volunteering for working in a UFO information centre, if that might be a suggested name for the organisation that would be required. I shall be interested to hear the summings up in this debate. I can give no explanation why there should be these phenomena concentrated within particularly the past 32 years as was confirmed by the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, and these flying saucers in the year 1947 when the phrase was coined; but I would just accentuate what has been said before and add that if they are man-made or some astronomical feature, and provided there is no risk of any security breach, then the public have a right to know about them.

9.20 p.m.

The Earl of HALSBURY: My Lords, in common with everyone else who has spoken, I should like to thank the noble Earl, Lord Clancarty, for giving us an opportunity to have, as it were, a scamper over the course and exchange views on this very interesting and controversial topic. At the same time, I should like to congratulate the noble Viscount on his maiden speech, which was obviously a very well thought out and well assemble

An extract from the House of Lords debate, in which Lord Gainsford describes his sighting of lights in the sky over Loch Fyne on New Year's Eve 1978.

Several peers reported their own sightings, including Lord Gainford who described seeing the New Year's Eve rocket re-entry 'a bright white ball with a touch of red followed by a white cone' over the Scottish hills. 'It was heading eastwards and seemed rather low in the sky, passing over the hills between Loch Sweyne and Loch Fyne [and] as the ball disappeared into the distance it seemed to divide into two parts.'

The Earl of Halsbury recalled his own sightings during the First World War when he was an eight-year-old boy: 'I used to go out after dark into the garden of the house where we lived and come back reporting the number of Zeppelins I had seen. What I had seen… was a large illuminated cigar-shaped object. In fact, what I was looking at was the lenticular shape that the perspective of a searchlight thrown onto a cloud base makes, and I was interpreting it as a Zeppelin and I was telling my parents how many I had seen.'[33]

Other peers referred to the link between belief in UFOs and religious faith. Lord Davies of Leek compared UFOs with belief in angels: 'Do my noble Lords believe in angels?' he asked. 'The answer from some will be yes and yet they have never seen one… but if I said I had seen a flying saucer they would not believe me. What is the difference?'. In his contribution, the Bishop of Norwich said he was concerned the UFO mystery 'is in danger of producing a 20th century superstition in our modern and scientific days which is not unlike the superstition of past years'.

The government's reply to Lord Clancarty's motion was delivered in elegant language by Lord Strabolgi. Drawing upon the Ministry of Defence's long experience he did his best to pour cold water on the idea of UFOs as alien spacecraft. He also dismissed claims by Liberal peer Lord Kimberley that the government was involved in 'conspiracy of silence' about UFOs, with the comment: 'there is nothing to have a conspiracy of silence about… the idea belongs, I suggest, to the world of James Bond.'

As Patrick Stevens and his advisers watched from the spectator's box, Strabolgi declared there were tens of thousands of unusual things to be seen in the sky. 'It is the custom to call such phenomena "UFOs", and to transpose this easily into "alien spacecraft",' he said. '[But] often the appearance is too fleeting and the description too imprecise for a particular cause to be attributed. What we can say is that there is a great variety of plain explanations. There is no need… for the far-fetched hypothesis of alien spacecraft.'

Strabolgi then outlined the colossal distances that would make visits from outer space unlikely. Referring to Clancarty's claim that evidence existed of thousands of such visits he said 'there is nothing to convince the Government that there has ever been a single visit by an alien spacecraft.' And he rounded off his presentation with a direct response to Lord Clancarty's call for the government to reveal what it knew. 'As for telling the public the truth about UFOs, the truth is simple,' he said. 'There really are many strange phenomena in the sky, and these are invariably reported by rational people. But there is a wide range of natural explanations to account for such phenomena. There is nothing to suggest to Her Majesty's Government that such phenomena are alien spacecraft.'[34]

Plainly the MoD hoped the Lords debate would draw a line under their involvement in the subject once and for all, but within a short time they would be drawn back into the debate by one of the most sensational UFO incidents reported on British soil.

CHAPTER 5
Crop Circles and Alien Abductions

During Christmas week 1980 the music of John Lennon, who had been recently murdered in New York, filled the airwaves on both sides of the Atlantic and Hangar 18, a sci-fi movie based on the Roswell incident, was on release in British cinemas. The movie poster proclaimed: 'On October 25th a large metallic object crashed in the Arizona desert. The government is concealing a UFO and the bodies of alien astronauts. Why won't they tell us?'

That same week Fylingdales, the RAF's early warning station in North Yorkshire, tracked 12 satellites as they decayed from their orbits. Of these, one was a particularly large object, part of the rocket that launched the Soviet spy satellite Cosmos 749, which re-entered Earth's atmosphere shortly after 9.00 pm on Christmas Day. In a replay of the events of New Year's Eve two years earlier (see p. 98), the rocket broke into several pieces as it did so, creating a spectacular firework display in the night sky over northwest Europe. During the night, police stations, coastguards and the RAF received hundreds of calls reporting between four and five 'comet-like objects leaving bright trails'. The next day excitable newspaper headlines spoke of fireballs, lights moving in convoys and even 'a giant spaceship spurting out smaller craft'.[1] To complete the heavenly spectacle, astronomers recorded three fireball meteors burning up in the atmosphere, the largest and brightest of which was seen at 3.00 am on 26 December 1980.

But while the solution for these sightings was soon revealed, the explanation for others has proved more elusive . For unknown to the outside world, a series of weird events were unfolding in a quiet corner of the Suffolk coastline. What is known today as the Rendlesham Forest incident has been described as 'the world's first officially observed, and officially confirmed, UFO landing' – Britain's equivalent of Roswell, in fact. And as the witnesses were all military personnel, their accounts have naturally been regarded as being highly reliable and credible.

BRITAIN'S ROSWELL

In 1980 RAF Woodbridge and RAF Bentwaters were part of a giant US Air Force complex hidden within the thick pine plantations of Rendlesham Forest, near the Suffolk coast eight miles from Ipswich. All was quiet during the Christmas holiday and military activity was minimal. Then around 3.00 am on 26 December a security patrol saw unusual lights that appeared to fall into the Rendlesham Forest, a mile past the east gate of the runway at Woodbridge. Fearing an aircraft had crash-landed, three unarmed US Air Force patrolmen obtained permission to go into the forest to investigate.

A dramatic account of what followed is described in an official USAF memo, written by a senior officer, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Halt. It has become one of the most famous documents in UFO history. Halt described how 'the individuals reported seeing a strange glowing object in the forest… metallic in appearance and triangular in shape', 2–3 m long and 2 m high. This UFO 'illuminated the entire forest with a white light [and] had a pulsing red light on top and a bank of blue lights underneath. The object was hovering or on legs. As the patrolmen approached, it manoeuvred through the trees and disappeared. At this time the animals on a nearby farm went into a frenzy.'[2]

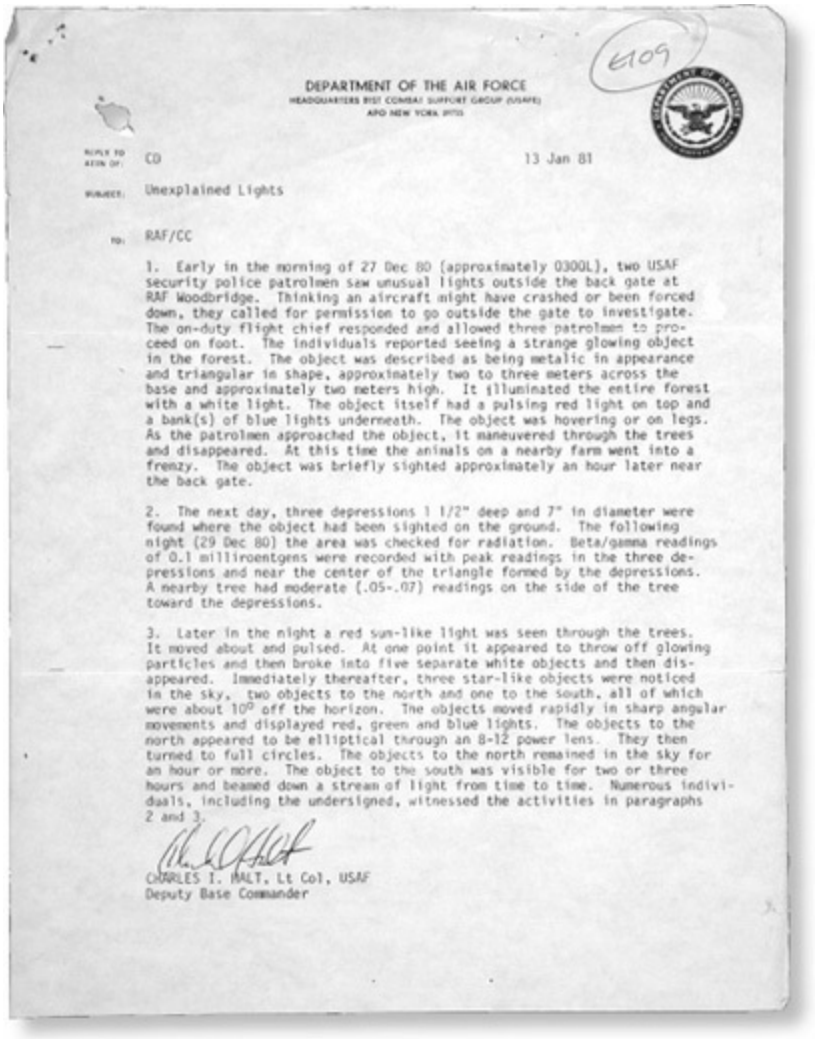
Two members of the patrol, Sgt Jim Penniston and Airman 1st class John Burroughs, were convinced that something had landed in the forest. Responding to their radio messages, RAF Woodbridge's security desk phoned Suffolk police to report: 'a sighting of some unusual lights in the sky, we have sent some unarmed troops to investigate; we are terming it a UFO at present.' In the early hours, two British police officers visited the forest and reported back: 'Air Traffic Control checked. No knowledge of aircraft. Reports received of aerial phenomena over southern England during the night. Only lights visible in this area was from Orford light house. Search made of area – negative.'[3]

British police returned to the scene for a second time in daylight at the request of the base security office who claimed they had 'found a place where a craft of some sort seems to have landed, two miles east of the East Gate'. But PC Brian Creswell, who examined the marks, was unimpressed. Although news of the airmen's strange experience was deliberately kept 'low key' by the military police, the base commander Col. Ted Conrad said 'the rumour mill was already operating' and he and Lt Col. Halt realised it was only a matter of time before the press got the story. 'We knew that silence would likely lead to allegations of cover-up', he admitted to me in 2010, '[so] we decided a brief

in-house investigation was in order'.[4]

Events escalated on the next day, 27 December, when a Christmas party hosted by the two officers was interrupted by the arrival of a police patrol led by Lt Bruce Englund who announced 'it's back.' As night fell, Rendlesham Forest was lit up by portable lights and military police staked out the forest. Although nothing unusual was seen before midnight, Lt Col. Halt assembled a small team of airmen equipped with a Geiger counter and night vision devices. He was determined, as he claimed later, to solve the mystery and debunk the UFO stories. In fact he was soon to undergo his own close encounter that transformed this case into one of the most perplexing UFO mysteries recorded in The National Archives files.

Halt's experience began as his small team visited the scene of the first UFO landing in the forest, outside the base perimeter in British territory. Here they inspected damage to the trees and measured what appeared to be higher than expected levels of radiation with their Geiger counter, both on the trees and in three shallow holes in the ground. These 'depressions' formed a triangular pattern that appeared to fit the description of the UFO given by the airmen on the first night. During the expedition Halt recorded a running timed commentary of events on his hand-held dictaphone. A copy of this 20 minute recording was released in 1984 and it contains this dramatic section:



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS 81ST COMBAT SUPPORT GROUP (USAFE)
APO NEW YORK 09755

REPLY TO ATTN OF: CD

13 Jan 81

SUBJECT: Unexplained Lights

TO: RAF/CC

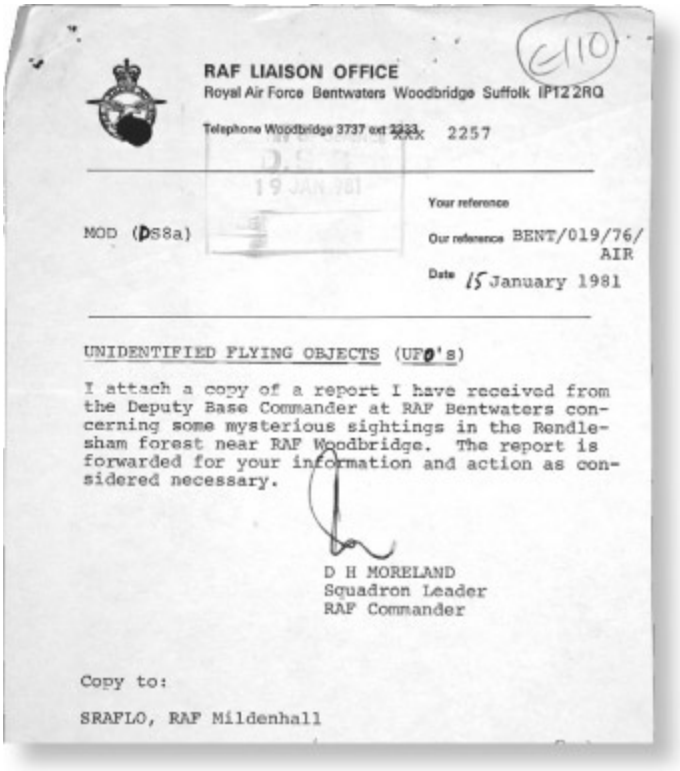
1. Early in the morning of 27 Dec 80 (approximately 0300L), two USAF security police patrolmen saw unusual lights outside the back gate at RAF Woodbridge. Thinking an aircraft might have crashed or been forced down, they called for permission to go outside the gate to investigate. The on-duty flight chief responded and allowed three patrolmen to proceed on foot. The individuals reported seeing a strange glowing object in the forest. The object was described as being metalic in appearance and triangular in shape, approximately two to three meters across the base and approximately two meters high. It illuminated the entire forest with a white light. The object itself had a pulsing red light on top and a bank(s) of blue lights underneath. The object was hovering or on legs. As the patrolmen approached the object, it maneuvered through the trees and disappeared. At this time the aninals on a nearby farm went into a frenzy. The object was briefly sighted approximately an hour later near the back gate.

2. The next day, three depressions 1 1/2" deep and 7" in diameter were found where the object had been sighted on the ground. The following night (29 Dec 80) the area was checked for radiation. Beta/gamma readings of 0.1 milliroentgens were recorded with peak readings in the three depressions and near the center of the triangle formed by the depressions. A nearby tree had moderate (.05-.07) readings on the side of the tree toward the depressions.

3. Later in the night a red sun-like light was seen through the trees. It moved about and pulsed. At one point it appeared to throw off glowing particles and then broke into five separate white objects and then disappeared. Immediately thereafter, three star-like objects were noticed in the sky, two objects to the north and one to the south, all of which were about 10° off the horizon. The objects moved rapidly in sharp angular movements and displayed red, green and blue lights. The objects to the north appeared to be elliptical through an 8-12 power lens. They then turned to full circles. The objects to the north remained in the sky for an hour or more. The object to the south was visible for two or three hours and beamed down a stream of light from time to time. Numerous individuals, including the undersigned, witnessed the activities in paragraphs 2 and 3.

CHARLES I. HALT, Lt Col, USAF
Deputy Base Commander

The famous memo by Lt Col. Charles Halt that describes UFOs sighted by USAF personnel outside RAF Woodbridge in December 1980. DEFE 24/1512



RAF LIAISON OFFICE
Royal Air Force Bentwaters Woodbridge Suffolk IP12 2RQ

Telephone Woodbridge 3737 ext 2333 2257

Your reference

Our reference BENT/019/76/AIR

Date 15 January 1981

MOD (DS8a)

UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS (UFO's)

I attach a copy of a report I have received from the Deputy Base Commander at RAF Bentwaters concerning some mysterious sightings in the Rendlesham forest near RAF Woodbridge. The report is forwarded for your information and action as considered necessary.

D H MORELAND
Squadron Leader
RAF Commander

Copy to:

SRAFLO, RAF Mildenhall

The cover note to the MoD's UFO desk sent by Squadron Leader Donald Moreland, the British base commander at RAF Woodbridge, reporting 'mysterious sightings in the Rendlesham forest'. DEFE 24/1512

‘Halt: 01.48 [am]	We’re hearing very strange sounds out of the farmer’s barnyard animals. They’re very, very active, making an awful lot of noise… You just saw a light? Where? Wait a minute. Slow down. Where?
Lt Englund:	Right on this position here. Straight ahead. In between the trees – there it is again. Watch, straight ahead, off my flashlight there, sir. There it is.
Halt:	I see it too. What is it?
Lt Englund:	We don’t know, sir.
Halt:	It’s a strange, small red light, looks to be maybe a quarter to a half mile, maybe further out… ’

At that point, the noise from animals is replaced by ‘deathly calm’ and tension in the small team increases when Halt announces the flashing light is moving towards them. With his voice reflecting surprise and amazement Halt cries out: ‘It’s coming this way. It is definitely coming this way… pieces are shooting off. There is no doubt about it. This is weird!’.[5] In his memo Halt describes this UFO as ‘a red sun-like light’ that moved through the trees, pulsated, then ‘appeared to throw off glowing particles and then broke into five separate white objects and then disappeared.’ At a press conference in 2007 he described this as ‘a bright red/orange oval object with a black centre’ that resembled a blinking eye as it moved through the trees.[6]

The tape-recording continues as Halt and his men move out of the forest into an open field where they saw ‘three star-like objects’ hovering about 10 degrees off the horizon, two in the northern sky and another in the south. These lights remained visible for over an hour, and the one in the south appeared to send down beams of light to the ground from time to time. During a TV interview in 1991 Halt claimed he and others saw these beams falling in the weapons storage area at RAF Bentwaters where, some have claimed, nuclear weapons were stored.[7] While these sightings were ongoing. Halt used his radio to contact RAF Bentwaters control tower to request radar confirmation . They called British military air traffic control at RAF Watton in Norfolk, but the

response said nothing unusual could be seen on their screens.

Throughout these events Halt was in direct radio contact with his boss, the base commander Col. Conrad who, in 2010, told me that he and other officers, along with their wives, left their homes at RAF Woodbridge to look out for the UFOs described by Halt. Col. Conrad revealed '[that] despite a sparkling, clear, cloudless, fogless night with a good field of view in all directions, we saw nothing that resembled Lt Col. Halt's descriptions either in the sky or on the ground.'[8]

'CURIOUS BUT SKEPTICAL'

Lieutenant Colonel (later Colonel) Charles Halt is a central figure in the Rendlesham UFO mystery. Early in January 1981 he took statements from the three airmen involved in the initial UFO incident on 26 December 1980 and his tape-recording of the second night's events was played to his superiors including a visiting general, Charles Gabriel.[9] But Col. Conrad decided that despite the testimony of his deputy and the other airmen 'we had no hard evidence; we had people in position to validate Halt's narrative, but none of them could.' And he added, 'in my judgement further investigation would gain us nothing but notoriety.'

Since the closure of Project Blue Book, the US Air Force had no official interest in, or any procedure for the reporting of UFOs. This posed a dilemma for Col. Conrad and his superior Col. Gordon Williams, who as wing commander of the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing had overall responsibility for the base complex. Conrad said that to his knowledge 'there was no written report to USAF higher headquarters' about the sightings and any information that Col Williams passed up the chain of command was 'done verbally and informally.'[10]

As the encounters took place outside the perimeter fence of the USAF complex, Col. Conrad decided the best way to wrap up the investigation was to ask Halt to send a report to the British authorities. Halt waited for the RAF base commander, Squadron Leader Don Moreland, to return from his Christmas holiday before asking his advice. Two weeks had now passed since the events. It was Moreland who advised Halt to write the famous memo summarising the events, which he sent with a covering note to the UFO desk at Whitehall. Both men expected the MoD would contact them and were

surprised when nothing happened.

RAF Woodbridge's British liaison officer, Squadron Leader Donald Moreland and Lt Col. Charles Halt at an awards ceremony on the base during the 1980s.

Halt's memo, titled Unexplained Lights, reached the UFO desk officer Simon Weeden on 13 January, almost three weeks after the sightings. Weeden immediately circulated details to a number of other MoD departments asking for their advice. I first obtained these documents in 2001 when I persuaded the MoD to release the contents of its file on the Rendlesham incident to me under the Code of Practice for Access to Government Information, a precursor to the British Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).[11] By this time a number of additional papers had been added to the original file, which appeared to have been opened several years after the events. These revealed that in January 1981 Halt's report was copied to the Defence Intelligence Staff, who said they were unable to explain the sightings. Another DI branch offered to follow up the unusual radiation readings, but there is no indication this offer was ever followed up.

According to Simon Weeden, the RAF air defence staff who scrutinised Halt's report were 'curious but sceptical'. He said the leisurely way in which the file was assembled 'shows that those around at the time were not unduly alarmed and did not see [it] as an incident of great importance.'[12] The file reveals MoD inquiries relied upon the accuracy of the dates and times supplied by Halt's memo as the basis for their checks with air defence radars. These found no evidence that anything unusual had been detected. As a result the MoD decided that 'US night-time military movements', the beam from the Orfordness lighthouse or even lights used by poachers were more likely explanations than an alien landing.

Rumours about a UFO landing at the base had by that time leaked out to civilian UFOlogists, along with a story that an unidentified object had been tracked by RAF radars shortly before the drama in the forest. During 1982 when the protest against American Cruise missiles at RAF Greenham Common was underway, the MoD began to receive letters asking if the UFO story had been spread to conceal a military accident involving a missile or top secret aircraft. After issuing denials of these rumours, UFO desk head Peter Watkins noted sarcastically: 'I hope that Bentwaters does not become East Anglia's answer to Warminster.'[13]

'S OF THE WORLD

BRITAIN'S BIGGEST SELLING SUNDAY NEWSPAPER

No. 3291

Sunday

STILL ONLY 25p BEST VALUE FOR MONEY

● Colonel's top secret report tells the facts

● Mystery craft in exploding wall of colour

● Animals flee from strange glowing object

UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK

A UFO has landed in Britain—and that staggering fact has been officially confirmed.

Despite a massive cover-up, News of the World investigators have proof that the mysterious craft came to earth in a blaze of light at 3 a.m. on December 27, 1980.

It happened in a pine forest called Rendlesham Wood just half a mile from the United States Air Force base at RAF Woodbridge, in Suffolk.

And that's OFFICIAL

NEWS of the WORLD INVESTIGATES

By KEITH BEABEY

EVIDENCE

NO HOAX

The headline from the News of the World that first broke the story of the Rendlesham UFOs to the world in October 1983.

Despite increasing pressure, the MoD refused to discuss Halt's report until 1983 when the contents of his memo, released under the American Freedom of Information Act, was splashed across the front page of the News of the World under the headline: 'UFO LANDS IN SUFFOLK – AND THAT'S OFFICIAL'. By that time sensational stories had begun to emerge from anonymous USAF personnel who claimed they were present at the second UFO landing in the forest, when contact had taken place between senior American officers and the occupants of the UFO. These accounts claimed threats had been made against airmen who witnessed these events and a cover-up was underway. The public stance of the MoD remained that Halt's report had been scrutinised by air defence staff who decided it had 'no defence significance', but they refused to be drawn on the nature of their investigation. On 13 April 1983, in response to questions from a British UFOlogist Jenny Randles, the MoD confirmed: '… that USAF personnel did see unusual lights outside the boundary fence early in the morning of 27 December 1980 but no explanation of the occurrence was ever forthcoming.' They added: 'There is however, no question of the account being a cover-up for a crashed aircraft or testing of secret devices as you suggest, nor was there any contact with "alien beings."'[14]

The apparent stonewalling by the MoD led two retired officials, Ralph Noyes and Admiral Lord Peter Hill-Norton – a former Chief of Defence staff – to accuse the British Government of a cover-up. Hill-Norton believed the incident was 'a potential banana skin looming for the MoD' and his letter challenged the MoD to answer this question: 'If the [USAF] report… is accurate, there is evidence that British airspace and territory are vulnerable to unwarranted intrusion to a disturbing degree. If, on the other hand, [Halt's report] must be dismissed, then we have evidence – no less disturbing, I suggest – that a sizeable number of USAF personnel at an important base in British territory are capable of serious misperception, the consequences of which might be grave in military terms.'[15]

LIGHTHOUSE OR UFO?

One of the earliest investigations of the Rendlesham UFO mystery was carried out by journalist and astronomer Ian Ridpath. The MoD file reveals how Ridpath discovered an important fact from the Suffolk police log of the incident. According to this, officers were called to the scene of the initial incident at RAF Woodbridge in the early hours of 26 December 1980. But in

his memo to the MoD, Halt had stated this sighting took place on 27 December. This error is significant because, as noted above, a bright fireball meteor was seen over southern England shortly before 3.00 am on 26 December, at the same time the US Air Force security guards reported seeing lights falling into the forest. Then it emerged that Halt was also wrong about the date of his own sighting. In his memo he suggests this occurred on 29 December 1980, when in fact we now know it happened in the early hours of 28 December.

Further blows to the credibility of the story emerged when Ridpath contacted Vince Thurkettle, a young forester who lived in the forest when the sightings occurred. Thurkettle had plotted on a map the route taken by Halt's team and found they were looking directly at the flashing beam of the Orfordness lighthouse, six miles away on the coast. After visiting the forest to record an interview for BBC Breakfast News, Ridpath wrote: 'Sure enough the lighthouse beam seemed to hover a few feet above ground level, because Rendlesham Forest is higher than the coastline. The light seemed to move around as we moved. And it looked close – only a few hundred yards away among the trees.'[16] The files also include a letter from Suffolk police inspector Mike Topliss who said the area was swept by powerful beams from the lighthouse and 'I know from personal experience that at night, in certain weather and cloud conditions, these beams were very pronounced and caused strange visual effects'.[17]

This explanation gained further weight in 1998 when the original statements collected by Lt Col. Halt from the airmen involved in the first incident were obtained by a Scottish UFOlogist, James Easton. These revealed how, after responding to the report of lights falling from the sky, three airmen had seen various coloured lights apparently within the trees. They drove into the forest to investigate, then left their vehicle and continued on foot. Eventually they emerged from the trees following a group of red and blue lights that disappeared. In a handwritten statement written in January 1981, airman John Burroughs says: 'Once we reached the farmer's house we could see a beacon going around so we went towards it. We followed it for about two miles before we could see it was coming from a lighthouse.'[18]

In their statements only one of the three-man team, Jim Penniston, claims the lights they saw in the forest were attached to a structured object that was 'definitely mechanical in nature'. Col Conrad questioned Sgt Penniston 24 hours after his experience. He said the airman told him the UFO was lit by

banks of white and blue lights that obscured an object ‘rectangular in shape and slightly larger than a jeep’, but ‘he didn’t get close enough for a detailed look’. More recently, Penniston has claimed he not only approached but examined and touched a triangular shaped object, 9 ft long by 6.5 ft high that was ‘sitting in a small clearing in the woods’. Lights were swirling around the exterior and ‘the air around us was electrically charged.’ He claims he was able to take photographs, make notebook entries and sketch symbols that were ‘etched into the surface of the craft, which was warm to the touch and felt like metal’. After 45 minutes ‘it manoeuvred through the trees and… was gone in the blink of an eye’.[19]

At a press conference in 2007 Penniston said ‘over 80 air force personnel’ saw the UFO take off, but this is just one of a number of claims that are contradicted by contemporary evidence. Another rumour that emerged early in 1981 claimed the UFO was tracked by British radar on one or both nights. While the MoD file reveals that checks were carried out on incorrect dates and times provided by Halt’s memo, it clearly states that no unusual targets were detected by any RAF radars during the Christmas/New Year period of 1980. This was confirmed by Squadron Leader Derek Coumbe who was duty commander at RAF Watton, the air traffic control centre for the region during the incident. When I spoke to him in 2001 he recalled receiving a call from RAF Bentwaters whilst Halt’s team were in the forest during the early hours of 28 December 1980. ‘They were very jumpy and panicky on the phone,’ he said, ‘but I personally checked the radar picture and there was absolutely nothing to be seen. They kept coming back and implying there should be something but we kept a watch on it through the whole period and nothing was seen.’[20]

Equally significant are the criticisms levelled at two other key elements of the story: the ground traces and radiation that Halt’s official report claimed were discovered in the forest. British police officers who examined the ‘landing site’ after the first UFO sighting said the three holes found ‘were of no depth and could have been made by an animal’. Vince Thurkettle, who visited the scene soon after, was equally unimpressed by what he saw. The holes, he thought, resembled those produced by burrowing animals such as rabbits, and he identified the damage on nearby trees as axe marks used by foresters to identify trees earmarked for felling. And as for the radiation, three independent scientific experts, including the makers of the Geiger counter, have since stated there was nothing unusual in the levels recorded by Halt’s team at the ‘landing site’. The manufacturers later announced these were ‘of little or no

significance'. In his 2010 testimony, Col. Conrad said during his investigation he received a verbal report from the airman handling the Geiger counter that confirmed 'the radiation levels [were] equal to normal background "noise"' expected in a pine forest'. Despite this contradictory evidence, Halt's claims about the presence of radiation at the 'landing site' still appeared in his memo to the MoD and, as a result they are now firmly part of the Rendlesham legend.[21]

So what conclusions can be drawn about the UFO incident that is widely known today as Britain's Roswell? Can all the weird sightings really be explained by a fireball, the lighthouse and bright stars, as Ian Ridpath has concluded, or did a genuine unidentified flying object visit Suffolk as the airmen continue to believe?

What is clear from the Rendlesham file is that the MoD's culture of secrecy encouraged the mystery to grow and provided fuel for allegations of cover-ups. Two decades passed before the full contents of their file on the Rendlesham incident were revealed. When they reached the public domain many UFOlogists were disappointed to find the papers did not contain the 'smoking gun' they had anticipated. Instead the unclassified file revealed a half-hearted investigation by disinterested officials. Most surprising of all, the papers revealed the MoD did not feel it was necessary to interview Halt or any of the airmen involved in the original sightings.

To this day Col Halt and the other airmen who reported seeing lights in Rendlesham Forest remain convinced they saw genuine 'unidentified flying objects'. At a press conference in Washington DC in 2007 Halt said: 'I have no idea what we saw but do know whatever we saw was under intelligent control.' He has since stated he believes the objects were 'extra-terrestrial in origin' and claims the security services of both the US and UK have jointly conspired to hide the truth from the public.[22]

Col. Ted Conrad says the story has grown in the re-telling 'from its humble beginnings to the sensation it has now become'. He says although the sightings remain unexplained, 'there were no conspiracies, no secret operation, no missile accident and no harsh interrogations.' He believes 'the search for an explanation could go many places including natural phenomena, the perpetration of a clever hoax or even the presence of an alien spacecraft'. But he feels 'the odds are way high against there being an ET spacecraft involved, and almost equally high against it being an intrusion of hostile Earthly craft'.[23]

The MoD's final assessment of Halt's report was given in a private briefing to Lord Hill-Norton by a Defence Minister in 1985. Officials briefed that Hill-Norton had become a 'champion of the case' and was pursuing his inquiries 'with evangelical fervour' via a series of Parliamentary questions in the House of Lords. But Lord David Trefgarne told the retired Chief of Defence that: '… it is highly unlikely that any violation of UK airspace would be heralded by such a display of lights. I think it equally unlikely that any reconnaissance or spying activity would be announced in this way. We believe that the fact Col Halt did not report these occurrences to MoD for almost two weeks after the event, together with the low key manner in which he handled the matter are indicative of the degree of importance in defence terms which should be attached to the incident.'[24]

Both bases were closed in 1993 following the collapse of the Soviet Union and RAF Bentwaters has since become a Cold War museum. Speculation about the UFO sightings continues but there is a great difference between the few certain facts that can be established from contemporary records and the elaborate stories that have grown up around the events of 1980. By the time of its 30th anniversary, Halt's report of 'unexplained lights' in the forest had grown into a fully-fledged UFO legend that was a rival for the Roswell incident. Today it is so well known that the Forestry Commission have set up a 'UFO trail' in the forest for pilgrims who wish to relive the story in their imagination. But as the decades pass, attempts to separate fact from fiction become increasingly difficult and the gulf between those who 'believe' and those who don't continues to grow. All that can be said with certainty is that it is unlikely we will ever know what really happened in Rendlesham Forest in December 1980.

The Missing Files

'If it's secret, old boy, don't write it down'– wartime motto from the Secret Intelligence Service (MI6).

By releasing their UFO files, the MoD has acknowledged there is an undeniable and enduring public appetite for information about them. But ironically, one of the most surprising revelations from the files was that until recently the government routinely destroyed its UFO papers because officials believed no one would want to read them in future years. In 1957 the Griggs

Committee on Public Records authorised the destruction of up to 95 per cent of all official paperwork at first review. This policy was not meant to allow the government to hide its secrets, but simply to save space in the era before electronic storage, by allowing officials to dispose of papers deemed to be of 'transitory interest'. The reviewers who decided which papers to keep and which to destroy were selected by government departments themselves. One wrote that 'I personally doubt that MoD would lose much if we filed UFO reports in the waste paper basket'. Until 1967, MoD reviewers destroyed old UFO files on the grounds that explanations for sightings were usually mundane and, until recently, public interest in the subject was low, so there was no reason to preserve them. The result was that the vast majority of Air Ministry, RAF and Ministry of Defence UFO files from 1947 to 1967 were lost decades before Freedom of Information arrived. Many other files would have followed them were it not for the intervention of UFOlogist Julian Hennessy who obtained a written commitment from the MoD in 1967 to preserve what remained of their files. But the British government is a vast bureaucracy and some branches and departments either forgot or failed to implement this decision.

As a result many potentially important files, including an Air Ministry report from 1955 (see Chapter 3) and papers concerning evidential sightings such as those reported from RAF Topcliffe in 1952 (see Chapter 2) and RAF Lakenheath-Bentwaters in 1956 (see Chapter 3) were lost. A similar fate appears to have befallen the gun camera footage of aerial phenomena seen by Ralph Noyes at the MoD Main Building in 1970 (Chapter 3). In 2010 it emerged that defence intelligence files covering the period of the UFO sightings by USAF personnel in Rendlesham Forest had joined them in the incinerator. The most frank admission of all came in an internal exchange during 2001 after the public release of the file on the Rendlesham incident (Chapter 5). A search of surviving records revealed that a collection of DI55 files, covering 1980–82 were missing, even though other files from surrounding years had survived. Even worse, records staff could not even establish when or why the files were lost as the destruction certificates themselves were only retained for a maximum of five years. Officials were warned at the time that if this 'apparent anomaly in the records' were made public '… it could be interpreted to mean that deliberate attempt had been made to eradicate the records covering the [Rendlesham] incident'.[1]

This example of careless record keeping was seized upon by conspiracy

theorists as evidence both of a ‘smoking gun’ and justification of their belief in a government cover-up of the ‘truth’ about the Rendlesham incident. But to those familiar with the workings of the British government and its civil service, there was another far less exciting, but nonetheless disturbing, interpretation – a cock-up rather than cover-up. By allowing the destruction of swathes of intelligence records on UFOs, the MoD have helpfully provided a stick for conspiracy theorists to beat them with.

MYSTERIOUS MARKS ON THE GROUND

Eyewitness testimony, even that from the most ‘credible witnesses’ such as pilots and police officers, can fall short of convincing evidence as it is open to many different interpretations. In addition, photographs and movie footage can be faked and radar traces can prove equally misleading. Hard physical evidence such as the ground traces reported at Rendlesham – if they could be identified by scientific examination as having an origin other than terrestrial – offer the promise of proof and are understandably the most keenly sought. If such hard evidence were found, it could solve the UFO mystery once and for all.

The search for this kind of conclusive evidence has had a long history, featuring in the earliest UFO files at The National Archives. One example dates from July 1963 when farmer Roy Blanchard found a huge 8-ft deep crater in a barley and potato field at Charlton in Wiltshire. Charlton was just 15 miles from the town of Warminster that became a focus for UFO sightings later in the 1960s (see p. 90). The hole was described as having zig-zag markings emanating from its centre and ‘looked as though it had been scooped out by an enormous spoon’. It was discovered shortly after a farm worker heard a loud explosion similar to a lightning strike.

Mr Blanchard was convinced a UFO was responsible for the crater and he contacted the police who in turn called out the Army’s bomb disposal squad. They cordoned off the field, believing the crater might contain the remains of a wartime bomb or fragments of a meteorite. The national media preferred to speculate about flying saucers and excitement grew when the Army’s instruments detected a metal object deep within the crater. After almost a week spent excavating, the bomb squad located the mysterious relic. This was later identified by the British Museum as a lump of ironstone, a sedimentary rock

with a high iron content.

Astronomer Sir Patrick Moore also visited the crater to investigate the possibility that it was created by a meteorite. Whilst examining the ground he noticed strange features in nearby fields 'taking the form of circular or elliptical areas in which the wheat had been flattened'. In a letter to New Scientist, Moore described one as 'very well defined… oval, 15 yards long… with evidence of "spiral flattening"'.[25] Moore felt it would be a 'remarkable coincidence' if these crop circles were not associated with the mysterious crater; equally he believed a hoax was 'wildly improbable'. The excitement which followed the discovery led to questions in the House of Commons. In response to a Parliamentary question on 29 July 1963 the Secretary of State for War, Joseph Godber, said 'the [object] initially thought to be a meteorite appears in fact to have been a piece of local rock and was not the cause of the crater'. Then a spokesman for the Army's Southern Command told the media: 'It is not a bomb so it has nothing to do with us. The cause of the hole… is unexplained, but it is no part of the Army's task to unravel such mysteries.'[26]

STRANGE CIRCLES IN THE CORN

Some 20 years after the discovery of the Charlton crater, the fields of Wiltshire would, of course, play host to that great late twentieth-century mystery – crop circles. Unusual swirled circles have appeared in fields of crops across southern England for centuries. Until the last two decades of the twentieth century no one seriously suggested they could be the work of aliens, though the sudden and uncanny appearance of swirled rings overnight in the middle of virgin crops have always led some to suggest the intervention of some supernatural agency.

A tantalising example is provided by a pamphlet titled The Mowing Devil, published in 1678, which features a woodcut depicting a horned devil cutting a field of oats with a scythe to produce a flattened circle within the crop. The text describes how a farmer argued with a workman over the cost of mowing his field, swearing 'that the Devil should mow it rather than He'. That same night 'the crop of oats showed as if it had been all of a flame… [and] next morning [it] appeared so neatly mowed by the Devil'. The pamphlet then describes what could easily be an example of a modern crop circle, telling how the Devil 'cut them in round circles, and placed every straw with the exactness that it would have taken above an Age for any Man to perform what

he did that one night'.[27]

The Mowing Devil pamphlet was intended as a moral lesson. The writer warned his audience not to make angry invocations to evil spirits that they might live to regret. Nevertheless, it is tempting to imagine that it could have been inspired by the appearance of unusual crop formations in seventeenth-century England.

The modern circles mystery can be traced to August 1980 when farmer John Scull discovered rough circular swathes of flattened oats in his fields below the Westbury White Horse on the edge of the Bratton Downs in Wiltshire. As in the case of the Charlton crater, the media immediately linked these to flying saucers, as Westbury is also close to Warminster. But the first crop circles to achieve prominence in the national media appeared during the summer of the following year, when a formation of three appeared in a natural amphitheatre known appropriately as The Devil's Punchbowl at Cheesefoot Head near Winchester. The central circle was 55 ft in diameter and two smaller circles, half its size, were arranged perfectly on either side.

The prominent positioning of the circles, below a road running through a beauty spot in one of England's most popular tourist areas, guaranteed a wide audience of bemused motorists. Inevitably, a string of curious visitors soon began to arrive among whom was the late engineer and UFOlogist, Pat Delgado. He examined the field and was struck by the sharply defined edges of the circles and the manner in which the corn stalks had been flattened in a clockwise swirl. Writing in the magazine Flying Saucer Review Delgado said there was no other evidence of damage to the crops. If human vandals were responsible, how did they enter and leave the field without leaving traces? It seemed to him that 'the rings could only have been made by something descending onto the field'. In the introduction to Circular Evidence, the book he co-authored in 1989, Delgado said the discovery at Cheesefoot Head had a 'profound' impact upon him.

Later Delgado and another enthusiast, Colin Andrews, began collecting information about other crop circles and both were quoted in the media as experts on the circles mystery. In Circular Evidence the two authors, whilst not directly attributing the crop circles to UFOs, said they believed '[they] are created by an unknown force field manipulated by an unknown intelligence'.[28]

Meanwhile a physicist, Dr Terence Meaden, began to formulate another theory after visiting some of the early circles discovered in Wiltshire and

Hampshire. Writing in The Journal of Meteorology, he expressed his opinion that a ‘previously unrecognised type’ of descending air vortex – a mini whirlwind – was a more likely natural cause for the strange crop circles.

OFFICIAL INTEREST

By the summer of 1983 what had begun as a minor local mystery became the focus for international media attention, when a new formation of five circles appeared at Westbury. Naturally, further links were made with ‘the famous Warminster triangle’ although no reliable reports of UFOs had so far been made in the area where the circles had been found. Fortuitously, this story broke in the wake of publicity surrounding the release of the Spielberg movie E.T. and the Daily Express published a dramatic aerial photograph of the Westbury circles alongside a picture of the loveable alien character from the film. The headline read: ‘ET – phone the Express’.

Various attempts were made to explain the crop circles that appeared across Wiltshire and Hampshire during the 1980s. The author of this letter suspected ‘a vertical landing and take-off aircraft’ – but who was to blame? DEFE 24/1517

As the files at The National Archives show, the MoD had now begun to receive letters from concerned members of the public. A man from Lancashire wrote to the UFO desk to say he believed it was unlikely that ordinary humans could flatten the corn in such a precise way. In his opinion they had been 'made by a vertical-landing and take-off aircraft' equipped with tripod landing gear similar to that used by NASA's lunar module. The writer asked if a foreign power had developed a version that was being used for 'some nefarious purpose'. UFO desk officer Pam Titchmarsh responded on 26 July 1983: 'in the case of the marks in the cornfield there have, to [our] knowledge, been no reports of UFOs in the area and no study has therefore been undertaken by the Ministry. I understand, however, that common opinion in the media puts the marks down to a whirlwind.'[29]

Other explanations at the time included rutting hedgehogs, giant hailstones and the apparently more sensible idea of hovering military helicopters, but this was quickly disproved. Downwash from helicopter rotor-blades damages crops by swirling them around in a random fashion in all directions.

It was because of this last theory that crop circles reappeared in the MoD's in-tray during August 1985, when a farmer near the Army Air Corps station at Middle Wallop in Hampshire discovered some strange depressions in a field of ripe wheat. According to a report sent to the MoD, the farmer called the base demanding to know what on earth Army helicopters were doing in his fields. An Army team, led by Lieutenant Colonel G.J.B. Edgecombe, visited the field and found 'an exactly circular hole in the wheat [which had] been laid flat in a clockwise twist 40 ft in diameter (as if a plank had been put with one end at the centre and swept round in a complete circle)'. This central circle was surrounded by four smaller circles. None of the soldiers could explain the circles and they returned to take aerial photographs of the field from a helicopter.

Lieutenant Colonel Edgecombe's report and photographs were sent to the UFO desk and then on to the Defence Intelligence Staff branch DI55 with the comment: 'although I don't think this can properly be regarded as a UFO sighting, there might conceivably be defence interest and [we] would therefore be grateful for your expert comments on the photographs.'

On 12 December 1985 DI55 replied, saying it was clear something unusual had occurred but 'just what remains a mystery'. As there had been no 'unusual sightings' reported in the area prior to the discovery of the circles, DI55 was

inclined, like Dr Meaden, to suspect the cause was ‘some kind of natural phenomena such as mini-tornadoes bouncing off the ground’.[30]

GOVERNMENT CONSPIRACY?

As the files at The National Archives show, MoD interest in crop circles continued for a number of years. In July 1988 a Puma helicopter was sent from RAF Odiham to photograph a crop circle formation in fields close to Silbury Hill, near Avebury in Wiltshire, after another complaint from a farmer. He was told the damage ‘was definitely not caused by helicopters [and] it would seem that the circles have been man-made and deliberately sited to line up and form a pattern with Silbury Hill, although we can’t understand why’.[31]

However these investigations were to have an unforseen and unfortunate consequence: news of military helicopters hovering over fields and photographs taken by service personnel began to reach crop circle enthusiasts and led to rumours of a secret government investigation.

52/1/7/13 E51

ROYAL AIR FORCE
Odiham Basingstoke Hampshire RG25 1QT

Telephone Odiham Section 40

98/7/1293.

Please reply to
The Officer Commanding

26 Jul 88

Dear Section 40 Sir,

Please find enclosed some pictures taken from an RAF Puma Helicopter of 'mysterious' damage to crops in the vicinity of Avebury. The fields are owned by Section 40 of Section 40 He believed that the damage may have been caused by hovering helicopters & asked us to take a look. This was definitely not the case, & I personally suspect Hippies with scythes!

With questions in Parliament and rumours of Royal interest, officials tried to discourage military helicopter crews visiting or taking photographs of crop circles during their routine training over the West Country. In a 1991 memo circulated to the armed services, UFO desk officer Owen Hartop said this practice put the branch in a 'difficult position' as publicly the MoD was on record as saying it did not investigate unexplained phenomena unless they had any 'defence significance'. His circular added: 'for the [Army Air Corps] to involve themselves in this way erodes this position, as the UFO lobby will see this as active investigation of UFO-related activity (as they view corn circles) – something that we have categorically and publicly stated that we do not do'. This advice appears to have been ignored and an official at the Royal Navy complained that 'it seems odd that we should impose an artificial constraint on servicemen to avoid any association with crop circles simply because of the antics of the lunatic fringe'.[32]

From 1987 the numbers of crop circles began to increase dramatically along with their size and complexity. In 1990 alone an incredible 700 new examples were discovered along with giant formations the size of football pitches. Smaller circles began to develop outside the main rings to form doubles, triples and multiple rings. In addition, complex new design elements began to appear such as hieroglyphs, symbols such as the Celtic cross and spectacular 'pictograms' based upon complex mathematical formulae.

While some people believed these could be messages from an 'unknown intelligence', others suspected they were created by human beings. Whatever their origin, the circles could not be ignored and a number of people became privately fascinated by the phenomenon. These included retired MoD officials Ralph Noyes and Lord Solly Zuckerman, who was a former Chief Scientist for the British Government. During the summer of 1991 Lord Zuckerman privately toured crop circle formations in Hampshire and Wiltshire and spoke to landowners who said they regarded the circles as 'an unexplained hoax and an unmitigated nuisance'. In a paper published later that year he concluded the majority of crop circles were probably created by human beings and wondered if 'there are people out to persuade a doubting world that corn circles can be added to flying saucers as proof of the existence of a supernatural force'.[33]

EXPOSED: Two artists admit they pulled off the great corn circles hoax for 13 years

MEN WHO CONNED THE WORLD

Headline from Today, September 1991, reporting the confession of Dave Chorley and Doug Bower as the creators of the crop circles found in southern England. [Right] Crop circle makers Doug and Dave photographed in their Southampton studio during 1991.

Shortly before Zuckerman's paper went to press, on 9 September 1991, the national newspaper Today revealed how two Hampshire-based watercolour artists, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley, had confessed they had been secretly creating the circles for 15 years. Mr Bower claimed he had always been interested in UFOs and got the idea whilst in Australia during the 1960s when swirled circles found in reedbeds in Queensland were called 'flying saucer nests'.

On return to England he began to meet his friend Dave Chorley on Friday evenings for a drink at a public house near Cheesefoot Head. They created their first crop circle in 1976: 'There was a lot of interest in UFOs at the time so I suggested we should flatten some corn to make it look like something had landed during the night.' Employing just wooden planks, string and old-fashioned guile to avoid leaving evidence behind them, the two friends set out to fool the world. Four years passed before their creations reached the newspapers and another three before the prank took off. 'We wanted the papers to catch on so we could have a good laugh about it,' Doug told reporter Graham Brough. 'We started doing them in the Punchbowl at Cheesefoot Head so people could look down on them from the road. Then all of a sudden we saw an article in the local paper and then articles in the national papers and we knew we had done it.' He added: 'The first publicity made it even more exciting [and] once the papers started saying a UFO had landed we started to go down to Warminster, where there had been a lot of UFO sightings, and do the circles there to create a bit of a stir.'

Doug and Dave's revelations dampened interest in crop circles for a short while and their confessions marked their retirement from the field. As their activities came to an end a second generation of circle-makers, led by teams such as London-based Rod Dickinson and John Lundberg, began to produce ever more elaborate designs. While Doug and Dave's motivation was simply to create the impression of a UFO landing, other circle-makers regard their more elaborate designs as works of art. More recently, a number of sophisticated formations have been commissioned by advertisers selling everything from breakfast cereals to holidays.

Wil and Matt of London-based The Circlemakers measuring a crop circle in Italy.

Despite the bursting of the crop circle bubble many enthusiasts, or 'cereologists' as they became known, continue to believe that it is possible to distinguish 'hoax' crop circles from 'genuine' examples that remain unexplained. Indeed, a few even feared a cover-up, believing the involvement of the army and Lord Zuckerman suggested their story was itself part of a conspiracy to hide 'the truth' about the crop circles. When Doug and Dave's confession was first published, rumours spread that their claims were part of a cunning plan by the authorities. The files at The National Archives show that shortly after their story was published by Today, UFOlogist Paul Fuller wrote to the MoD asking if there was any truth in rumours they had organised a 'secret meeting' with officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Department of the Environment to discuss crop circles. The rumour alleged the government was so alarmed by the phenomenon that it had discussed spreading disinformation to mislead its citizens. This included the employment of crop circles hoaxers and the creation of a 'bogus news agency… to spread this untrue story to the public'. The UFO desk officer, Nick Pope, responded that 'MoD has no interest or involvement in this subject at all, and has never been involved in any activities that you asked about'.[34]

ALIEN ENCOUNTERS

During the first two decades of the modern UFO era, the phenomenon was largely restricted to accounts of anomalous disc- and cigar-shaped objects, or lights in the night sky. For those who believed that flying saucers existed and were piloted by intelligent beings it was only a matter of time before someone made contact with them. During the twentieth century popular ideas about what extraterrestrials might look like were drawn mainly from science fiction films and magazines, where aliens tended to originate from nearby planets in our solar system such as Mars and Venus. Their appearance reflected their motives, from the hideous monsters described by H. G. Wells in The War of the Worlds (1898) to the benevolent, angel-like creatures with wings pictured by Fenton Ash in his 1909 novel Trip to Mars.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War it was perhaps inevitable that depictions of aliens in Hollywood movies tended to emphasise their hostility. Films such as The Thing from Another World (1951), Invaders from Mars (1953) and Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) fed upon the early saucer panics to portray aliens as belligerent creatures bent upon

invading Earth. More complex motives were displayed by the alien Klaatu, played by Michael Rennie in the seminal 1951 movie The Day the Earth Stood Still, who came in peace but nonetheless threatened humankind with extinction if his message was not heeded. In Britain monstrous, hostile aliens featured in The Quatermass Experiment, first shown on BBC TV in 1953.

Throughout the Cold War the threat of nuclear annihilation continued to preoccupy both film-makers and those who claimed to have made contact with occupants of flying saucers. The most notorious of these 'contactees', as they became known, was a Polish-American émigré, George Adamski, who ran a hamburger stall on the slopes of the Mount Palomar observatory in California. His 1953 book, co-written with British author Desmond Leslie, Flying Saucers Have Landed, sold more than a million copies worldwide and was translated into 50 languages.

Adamski described his meeting in the Mojave Desert with a tall, blond angelic being from Venus, the planet of love, who emerged from a flying saucer scout craft. The being indicated his peaceful intent by means of telepathy and, like Klaatu, warned Earthlings of the danger posed by atomic bombs. Adamski's sensational story immediately polarised opinion both in the newly founded UFO community and the wider world. While his tome was welcomed by many who believed flying saucers were here to save mankind, it was denounced by scientists and astronomers who dismissed Adamski's claims as 'preposterous'. The book also contained photographs of Venusian spacecraft taken by Adamski from his Californian home. These were panned by critics such as Arthur C. Clarke as obvious and crude fakes.

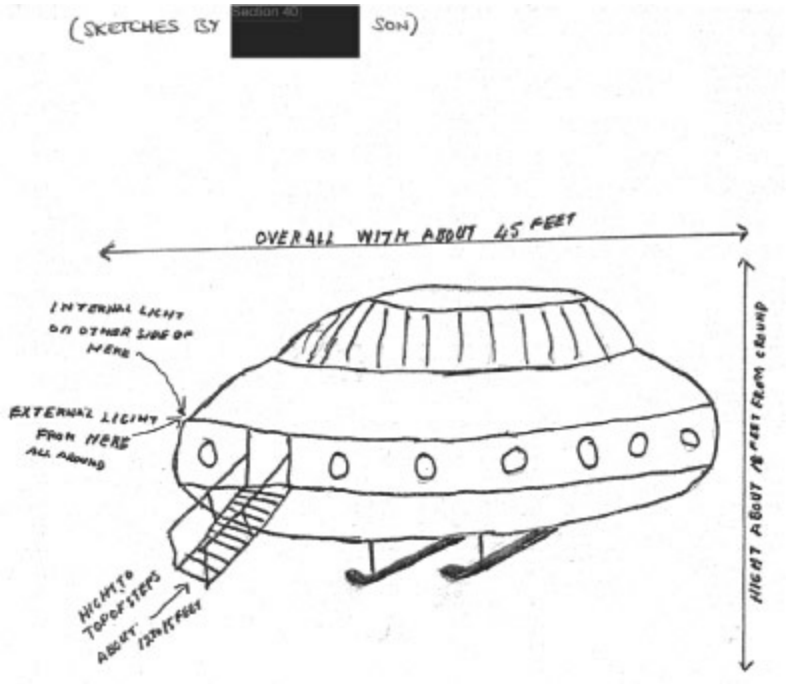
An artist’s impression of the Venusian flying saucer pilot Orthon who communicated with Polish-American émigré George Adamski in the Mojave Desert in 1952. From an article published by Illustrated magazine in October 1953.

The book's sequel, Inside the Spaceships (1956), described the author's visits to inhabited parts of the Moon, Venus and Saturn. Adamski attracted a small cult following, but his claims were wildly improbable even before the first space probes reached our neighbouring planets. These confirmed what scientists had already suspected: beyond Earth, our solar system appeared to be pretty devoid of life. Today controversy continues to surround the possibility that micro-organisms might exist below the Martian surface, but we know there are no canals as some astronomers once believed. Venus has a furnace-like surface temperature and atmospheric pressure nearly 100 times that of the Earth, with sulphuric acid clouds floating on a blanket of dense carbon dioxide. Adamski's blond, peace-loving Venusians are unlikely inhabitants of this fiery hell.

From this point, accounts of contacts with the crews of UFOs underwent subtle changes and the friendly, Nordic-looking aliens who befriended George Adamski were replaced by colder, ambivalent creatures whose motives and purpose appeared more inscrutable and sinister than anything Hollywood had previously imagined.

MISSING TIME

The seminal story that sparked the modern obsession with 'alien abductions' was told by Betty and Barney Hill, a couple from New Hampshire in the US. Their experience began late one night in September 1961 as they returned home from a holiday in Canada. Whilst driving through the deserted White Mountains they saw a brightly lit UFO that appeared to follow them. At one stage Barney, who was driving, stopped the car and watched the object through binoculars. Behind a row of windows he saw a group of humanoid figures watching him and, believing they were about to be captured, he drove off in panic.


(SKETCHES BY [redacted] SON)
OVERALL WITH ABOUT 45 FEET
INTERNAL LIGHT ON OTHER SIDE OF HERE
EXTERNAL LIGHT FROM HERE ALL ROUND
HIGHT TO TOP OF STEPS ABOUT 12 FEET
HIGHT ABOUT 18 FEET FROM GROUND

Alfred Burtoo's drawing of a flying saucer which he said landed beside the Basingstoke Canal near Aldershot in 1983. According to an account in MoD files, he was taken into the spacecraft by small, green-clad aliens who scanned his body and announced: 'You can go. You are too old and infirm for our purpose.' DEFE 25/1925/1

Soon afterwards the couple were confronted by the landed UFO and its occupants who were now blocking the road. The next thing the Hills consciously recalled was an odd beeping noise. Suddenly they were aware of being on a road 35 miles further south and when they returned home, they realised the journey had taken two hours longer than expected. Betty subsequently experienced a series of disturbing dreams where the crew of the UFO took her onto the craft against their will.

In 1964 the Hills were hypnotically regressed by a Boston psychiatrist, Dr Benjamin Simon, and their stories recorded. Their separate accounts of what transpired during the period of missing time appeared to match Betty's dreams in significant places. Details emerged of a medical examination, a tour around the spacecraft and a lengthy conversation between Betty and the leader of the alien crew. She described her captors as shorter than her husband with grey skin, dark eyes and prominent noses. They were human in appearance, wore jackets, trousers and caps similar to military uniforms and behaved in 'a professional way… there was no haste, no waste of time'.[35]

When their tale was published by journalist John Fuller in the bestselling book The Interrupted Journey (1966), the Hills became overnight celebrities. Their incredible story, with its key motifs of 'missing time' and medical examination, went on to become the template for all future alien abduction stories.

Sightings of and contact with UFO occupants were few and far between in Britain before the Hills' story was serialised by the London Daily Mirror in October 1966. Two years later the couple appeared in the BBC documentary Flying Saucers and the People Who See Them. In stark contrast to the reaction received by Adamski and other contactees during the 1950s, on this occasion more people were prepared to suspend disbelief in the existence of aliens. It seemed that now the space age had become reality, people were more predisposed to entertain stories describing encounters with extraterrestrials. The path was open for others to come forward with accounts of alien abductions from Britain and other parts of the world.

ALIENS VISIT DEVON

In Britain, despite the protestations of sincere witnesses such Angus Brooks (see p. 77), officials remained largely unmoved by reports of 'close

encounters'. This term was originally coined in 1972 by Dr J. Allen Hynek, Project Blue Book's consultant astronomer, to classify types of UFO experiences. A close encounter of the first kind (CE1) involved the close approach of a UFO, while a CE2 left permanent evidence either on the witness or the environment. Close encounters of the third kind, used by Steven Spielberg as the title of his 1978 film, involved the observation of UFO occupants. The Hills' story falls into a further category, with a CE4 involving contact with or abduction by the alien occupants.

The MoD's scientists pointed out that stories in this category usually relied upon the testimony of a single witness and were rarely supported by independent evidence. They felt that: 'some must be hoaxes; in other cases we would be prepared to accept that the people concerned believe they have seen something; but we are convinced that they were victims of some form of hallucination.'[36]

Perhaps the first account of a CE3 in the files at The National Archives that the MoD took seriously enough to warrant an investigation comes from 1968. This was reported by a lorry driver, Andrew Perry, who arrived at a police station in Devon on the night of 27 February to report a bizarre and terrifying experience. In a police statement Mr Perry described how he was driving his articulated lorry on the road from Bideford to Cullompton at 6.55 pm when he saw a bright light appear at the crest of a hill. As he got closer, he could see the light came from a mushroom-shaped object.

'I drove a bit further down the road until I was abreast [of] the object, and I would think by then it was about 300 yards distant. I stopped the lorry and climbed out of my cab, leaving the engine running. I climbed onto the trailer to get a better view, and saw also what appeared to be five or six figures about 4 ft in height, they were a dozen or so yards from the object and were spread out around it… '[37]

Suddenly these figures scrambled towards the UFO and disappeared inside. Then it climbed vertically and emitted a very high-pitched whirring noise that caused his lorry to vibrate. By this time, fear had replaced curiosity and he jumped back into the cab. Then:

'I put the engine in gear, and started to go down the road as fast as I could go. The object had risen to about 200 ft and I travelled about a dozen yards, the noise from the object was so intense I couldn't hear my engine running – as it passed overhead. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, my engine cut out. I

braked, stopped and cradled my head in my arms as I thought this object was coming right down on top of me. A few seconds passed, the noise went and when I looked up it was about the size of a football and was going away into the sun at a really fantastic speed. I pulled myself together after a moment or so and automatically pressed the starter button. The engine started and I went as fast as ever I could to the nearest police station.'[38]

REPORT OF AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT

A. Date, Time and Duration of Sighting. (Local times to be quoted).

0323 2.10

B. Description of Object. (Number of objects, size, shape, colours, brightness, sound, smell, etc). one object appeared Square in shape all lit up Red light on one side (left) and green on the right side, both steady. There was a flame on the top with a window pat-through into three short-long-short * second peak *

C. Exact Position Observer. (Geographical location. Indoors or outdoors. Stationary or moving). outdoors three doors down from her house. Moved as though going to crash into her house but stopped in front of her.

D. How observed. (Naked eye, binoculars, other optical device, still or movie camera). Naked eye.

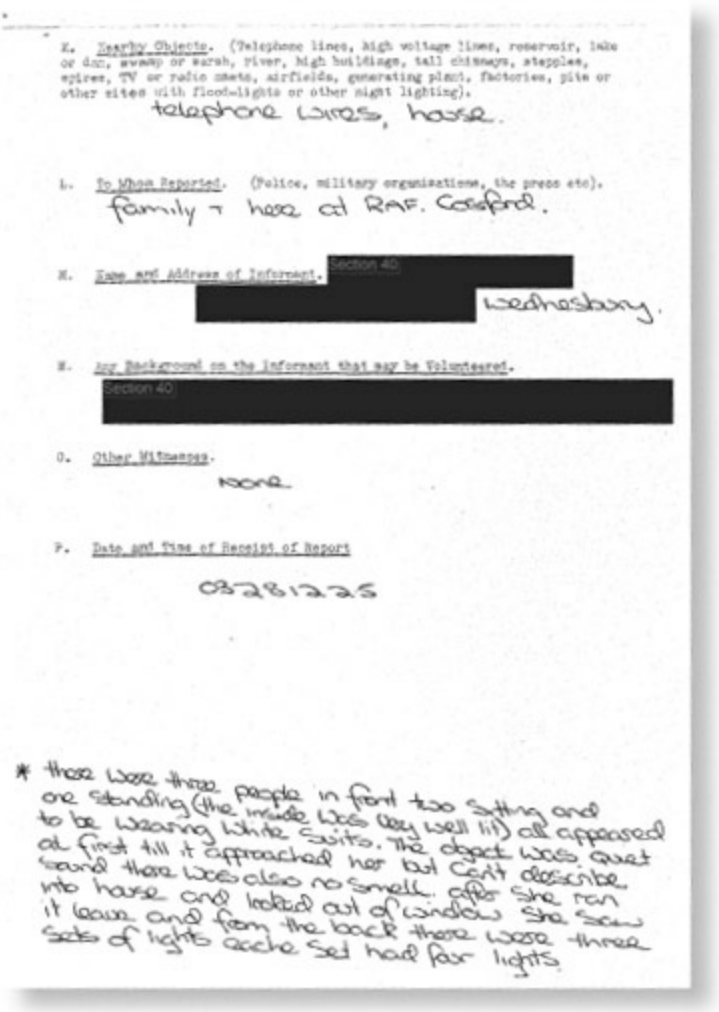
E. Direction in which Object was First Seen. (A landmark may be more useful than a fully estimated bearing). from where she was standing looking towards Walsall

F. Angle of Sight. (Estimated heights are unreliable). She would say 40ft as it was heights with her house

G. Distance. (By reference to a known landmark wherever possible). 5-6 yrds

H. Movements. (Changes in E, F and G may be of more use than estimates of course and speed). Moving down + towards her as if going to Crash

J. Meteorological Conditions During Observations. (Moving clouds, haze, mist etc). Very clear, NO Clouds



K. Nearby Objects. (Telephone lines, high voltage lines, reservoir, lake or dam, swamp or marsh, river, high buildings, tall chimneys, steeples, spires, TV or radio masts, airfields, generating plant, factories, pits or other sites with flood-lights or other night lighting).
telephone wires, house.

L. To Whom Reported. (Police, military organisations, the press etc).
family + here at RAF. Cosford.

M. Name and Address of Informant. [redacted] Wednesbury.

N. Any Background on the Informant that may be Volunteered.
[redacted]

O. Other Witnesses.
none

P. Date and Time of Receipt of Report
03281225

* there were three people in front two sitting and one standing (the inside was very well lit) all appeared to be wearing white suits. the object was quiet at first till it approached her but can't describe. sound there was also no smell. after she ran into house and looked out of window she saw it leave and from the back there were three sets of lights each set had four lights.

A completed UFO report form from the MoD files, recording a sighting from the West Midlands in 1988 of an object containing ‘three people… wearing white suits’. DEFE 24/1928/1

Mr Perry's report was circulated to a number of MoD branches and checks were made on air defence radar without success. Officials attempted to apply a sensible explanation and suspected that a low-flying helicopter was involved, but checks with RAF and mearby naval bases ruled out this possibility. Unable to reach a conclusion, the MoD categorised Perry's report under 'miscellaneous' and decided to take no further action.

From the late 1970s, the number of stories describing UFO landings and sightings of occupants reported to the Ministry began to increase. Desk officers continued to file these alongside the far more frequent reports of shapes and lights in the sky. For example, during a UFO flap in the Midlands in February 1988 a woman contacted RAF Cosford, near Wolverhampton, to report a square-shaped UFO with a dome on top that was illuminated by red and green lights. The UFO was silent at first until it 'moved as though [it was] going to crash into her house' but stopped just a few yards away. As it moved towards her, a row of partitioned windows became visible behind which she saw, in a lighted cabin, 'three people, two sitting and one standing; all appeared to be wearing white suits'. Terrified, she ran inside the house and, looking through the window, watched the object disappear.[39]

A similar report was made one night in November 1992 when a Brighton man phoned the RAF to describe a brightly lit UFO shaped like a 'squashed rugby ball' that hovered above his house. Through windows in the side, he saw two men wearing beige uniforms standing in front of what looked like machinery. When one of the crew members appeared to notice him the lights went out and the UFO disappeared out towards the English Channel. A RAF note on the report reads: 'Caller sounded genuine enough and his main concern seemed to be that he didn't want to talk too much about the craft if it was "one of ours that we wanted to keep secret".'[40]

One of the most bizarre examples of an 'alien encounter' in the MoD files was described in a report from RAF Wattisham, Suffolk on 21 November 1989. This described how the RAF community liaison officer at the base received a call from 'a distressed female' who refused to divulge her name and address. After he reassured her, she revealed how at 10.30 the previous night she had been walking her dog on a sports field not far from her home in Norwich. She was approached by a man with fair hair and a Scandinavian accent who wore a light brown garment similar to a flying suit.

'He asked her if she was aware of stories about [crop circles], and then

went on to explain that he was from another planet similar to earth and that the circles had been caused by others like him who had travelled to earth. He went on to explain that the purpose of their visits were [sic] friendly but that they were told not to have contact with the people of earth for fear that they might be treated as a potential threat. He had spoken to her because he felt it was important for contact between the two people to occur. The caller said that she was completely terrified while this was taking place and couldn't remember much else about the conversation. After about ten minutes the man left her and she ran towards home until she heard a loud buzzing noise behind her and turned to see a large spherical object, glowing orange-white, rising vertically from behind some trees which rose steadily until out of sight.'[41]

The RAF Wattisham report ended with the following comment: '[our] conversation with the lady lasted about one hour followed by another ten minutes when she rang again. I could not get her to divulge her name or address but I believe that this was a genuine call.'

A MATTER FOR THE CIVIL POLICE

Public fascination with stories of alien abductions spread across the world following the publication in 1981 of a book by the late American artist and UFOlogist Budd Hopkins, Missing Time. This was followed in 1987 by science fiction author Whitley Strieber's personal account of encounters with small creatures he called 'the visitors'. Communion went on to become an international bestseller and its striking cover image of an alien face ensured that everyone in the Western world was aware what these mysterious creatures looked like. The inverted, pear-shaped head and the black slanting eyes soon became the trademark of the grey aliens. In the aftermath of these books and the tabloid stories that accompanied them, the number of letters received by the Ministry of Defence describing contacts with aliens began to grow.

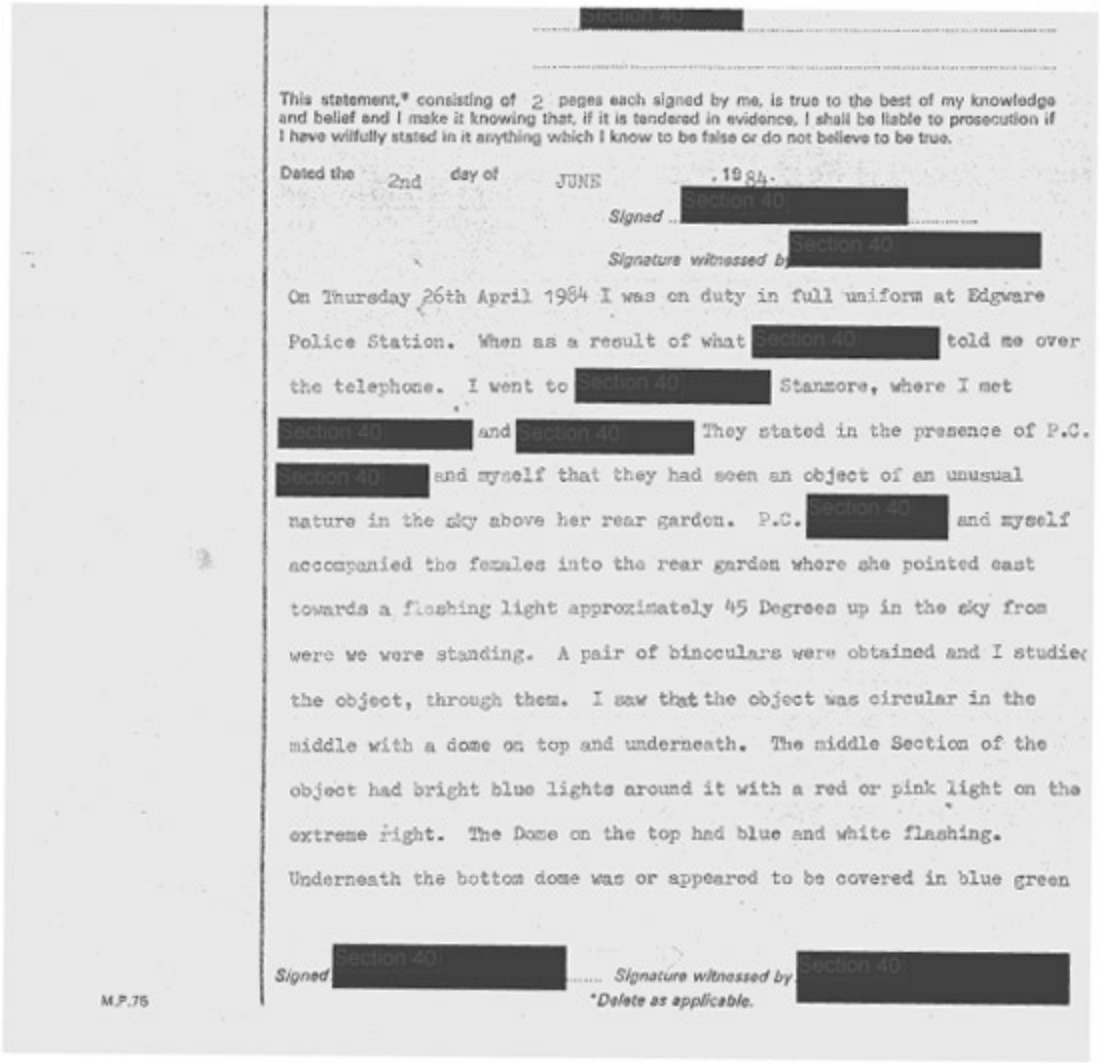
In 1992 a new UFO desk officer, Nick Pope, opened a file titled Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs): Close encounter reports, Alien entities, abductions. Unlike most of his predecessors he had developed a personal interest in the subject. Displaying a spirit of openness rarely seen before in the MoD, Pope collected accounts of alien contacts recorded in files dating back to 1985 and was willing to make copies of these available to UFOlogists. In a covering letter sent to a number of UFO organisations in 1992 he wrote: 'In my time here I have not received a single report of any close encounters but we

have, in the past, received a very small number of letters that might fall into the category of a close encounter of the third or fourth kind.'

He added: 'As we receive so few, and recognizing their value to researchers, I agreed that these reports could be released… I draw no conclusions from this material, and remain open-minded as to what may have prompted these reports.'[42]

This file contains five letters dated between 1985 and 1992 from people who wished to tell the MoD about their contacts with alien beings, including one account dated January 1985 by a Cheshire man who wished to reveal details of his 'physical and psychic contacts' with green aliens that began in his childhood. One of these, a being called Algar, was killed in 1981 by another race of beings who wanted to stop him making contact with the MoD. The writer claimed he had visited their secret bases and described how he and his wife saw one of their craft shot down by rival aliens over Wallasey Town Hall. A contemporary MoD note on the letter simply reads: 'No reply sent.'

Another account from the file stands out as eerily similar to the stories described in the books by John Fuller and Budd Hopkins. The woman who sent it had clearly thought long and hard before writing to the Ministry with a story she realised sounded unbelievable. The letter described how one night in October 1982 Linda Taylor and her mother were returning to a town near Manchester from visiting a sick relative. Whilst driving on the normally busy East Lancashire Road, they spotted a strange light in the sky that appeared to pace their car. When Linda tried to accelerate, the car was inexplicably slowed by the appearance of 'an odd-looking black type 1930s car that was in front of ours… the driver was tall, stocky and wearing a strange German-type hat.' Even though the car in front was dangerously close, this odd-looking driver did not appear to show any sign of movement and as their car came to a standstill, with the electric system going haywire, she decided to open her window and look out.



[redacted]

This statement,* consisting of 2 pages each signed by me, is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and I make it knowing that, if it is tendered in evidence, I shall be liable to prosecution if I have wilfully stated in it anything which I know to be false or do not believe to be true.

Dated the 2nd day of JUNE .1984.

Signed [redacted]

Signature witnessed by [redacted]

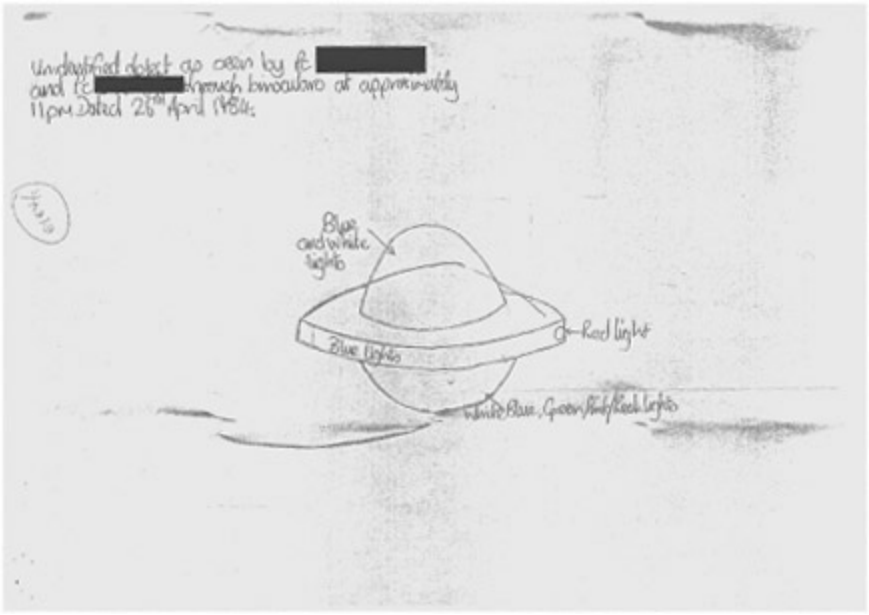
On Thursday 26th April 1984 I was on duty in full uniform at Edgware Police Station. When as a result of what [redacted] told me over the telephone. I went to [redacted] Stanmore, where I met [redacted] and [redacted] They stated in the presence of P.C. [redacted] and myself that they had seen an object of an unusual nature in the sky above her rear garden. P.C. [redacted] and myself accompanied the females into the rear garden where she pointed east towards a flashing light approximately 45 Degrees up in the sky from were we were standing. A pair of binoculars were obtained and I studied the object, through them. I saw that the object was circular in the middle with a dome on top and underneath. The middle Section of the object had bright blue lights around it with a red or pink light on the extreme right. The Dome on the top had blue and white flashing. Underneath the bottom dome was or appeared to be covered in blue green

Signed [redacted] Signature witnessed by [redacted]

M.P.75

*Delete as applicable.

Part of a statement by a police officer called to witness a UFO seen by members of the public in Edgware, North London, during April 1984. DEFE 24/1925/1



A police officer's drawing of the UFO seen from Edgware. DEFE 24/1925/1

‘To my horror, above my car was an unusually shaped craft of some kind, about 30 feet above us. The lights on this object were huge and very dazzling; the size of the thing was roughly about the size of a double decker bus on its side… the strangest thing though was that… we both felt as though time had stood still and it was very frightening indeed.’[43]

After this bizarre interlude Linda screamed and the car in front disappeared, along with the hovering UFO. The two women immediately drove to a nearby petrol station where they spotted the object again before it disappeared into the night sky. When Linda arrived home her husband was distraught, fearing she had been involved in an accident, as she was so long overdue. The couple worked out that almost one hour of the journey could not be accounted for. Worse still, she was alarmed to discover bruising on her legs and suffered sickness and ‘terrible dreams’ in the aftermath of the UFO encounter. Like Betty and Barney Hill, these involved visions of being inside the craft and seeing a tall man with blue eyes and white shoulder-length hair who wore a one-piece silver suit.

Her letter to the Ministry ended with a plea for help as she feared the experience might be repeated: ‘Please… could you help me to solve or at least explain to me what happened on that road and why it happened to me and my mum… I can’t talk to anyone about this because I don’t think most people would believe. But I swear it happened.’

The UFO desk officer at the time was clearly perplexed by Linda Taylor’s detailed account and struggled to respond with the standard explanations of weather balloons and aircraft lights. He was forced to concede that some rare cases, such as hers, ‘where rational explanations are not readily available… can be very disturbing’. The MoD could not, however, justify any follow-up investigation, ‘unless a clear threat to the security of the UK had been identified’. The best he could do was to advise her to contact a UFO society or consult a doctor who ‘may not be able to explain the incidents, but… might be able to help you to stop worrying about them’.[44]

In 1996, Welsh UFOlogist Chris Fowler challenged the MoD to justify its policy of disinterest in cases where British citizens like Linda Taylor claimed to have suffered harm as a result of actions by occupants of unidentified craft in UK airspace. The reply from UFO desk officer Kerry Philpott stated firmly: ‘Abduction is a criminal offence and as such is a matter for the civil police.’ As regards ‘abduction by alien lifeforms, as the MoD is not aware of any

evidence which might substantiate the existence of extraterrestrial activity of the type to which you allude, this is a non-issue as far as the MoD are concerned'.[45]

CHAPTER 6
Turn-of-the-Century UFOs

The question ‘Do UFOs exist?’ is no longer an issue for David Hastings, a veteran pilot with 40 years’ flying experience that began with service in the RAF. Like many civilian pilots and some military aircrew, a dramatic personal sighting left him in no doubt the answer to that question is an emphatic ‘Yes!’. The event that convinced Hastings happened on the final leg of an epic trans-American trip. On the afternoon of 9 September 1985 he and his experienced co-pilot had just left the Grand Canyon behind them in their twin-engined Cessna Skymaster. As they approached restricted airspace at 10,500 ft above the Mojave Desert, ground radar reported: ‘no conflicting traffic’.

Hastings recently described what happened next, saying: ‘You can imagine our surprise when a small dot appeared at our same altitude and in our 12 o’clock which rapidly grew in size. We were both convinced that we were about to have a head-on mid-air collision with a high-speed military jet aircraft and both pushed hard down on the control columns, expecting a tremendous bang and the end of our flight.’[1]

At that point a huge black shadow passed over the cockpit. It vanished without making a sound and left no turbulence behind it. The two shaken pilots turned and asked each other: ‘What the hell was that?’. A check with ground control told them that still nothing was showing on radar but as minutes passed and tension grew both men were gripped by the feeling that something was flying in formation alongside them. Hastings then remembered his camera in the back of the plane. Unstrapping himself, he grabbed it, taking two shots from the port windows before the feeling passed, leaving them ‘shaken and puzzled’.

When the film was developed, the pair were staggered by the results. While the first snap showed just the Cessna’s port wing and the mountains below, the second showed a dark, elongated object with what appears to be some form of heat or exhaust emerging from its underside. Later in the trans-American trip, a friend in the US Navy asked to borrow the photograph. All he would say on returning it was ‘no comment’.

This reaction is given another dimension when you consider where the sighting occurred. The two men's trip had taken them past restricted military airspace and close to Edwards Air Force Base and the secret Nevada Test and Training Range that contains Groom Lake. Both of these fall within the mysterious region known as 'Area 51' and both have, over the years, been home to a number of 'black project' programmes such as the Stealth fighter and the B-2 flying wing. Could it be that Hastings' near-miss had been with some advanced top secret military aircraft? Hastings, for one, remains unconvinced by this idea and is certain the object he saw that day was not man-made. 'Having flown for over 40 years like most pilots I have always accepted UFOs,' he told me. 'You only have to look up at the sky at night to realize that we cannot be the only planet that supports life.'

Two photographs taken by British pilot David Hastings during a near-miss over the Mojave Desert near the mysterious ‘Area 51’ on 9 September 1985. The second shows a mysterious elongated object. UFO or experimental aircraft?

UFOS AND PILOTS

In retirement, David Hastings felt confident writing and talking about his experience. For a pilot this is actually quite unusual. Flying aircraft is a responsible job and, quite understandably, few wish to be known as 'the one who sees flying saucers', however sure they might be of what they have seen. The late Graham Sheppard, a British Airways pilot who made two sightings of his own and famously spoke out on the issue, estimated that some 10 per cent of aircrew had some form of UFO experience during their career. In 1999 he said: 'I must have spoken to 20 pilots who have had sightings but all are adamant they do not want publicity.'[2]

One of the earliest UFO sightings made by a civilian aircrew remains one of the most unusual even though it has been adequately explained. It was reported by the crew and passengers of a BOAC Stratocruiser during a flight from New York to London in June 1954. The captain, James Howard, was interviewed live by BBC news on landing and his story was widely reported by national newspapers who treated it as a reliable report from a credible witness. Captain Howard described how he and co-pilot Lee Boyd watched a group of strange objects for 18 minutes as they cruised at 19,000 ft above Goose Bay in Labrador. When first spotted, shortly after 9.00 pm, the sun was low on the horizon and six small dark objects were visible below the port beam. As they climbed, the crew saw these were arranged on either side of a large 'jellyfish-shaped' object that was constantly changing form. Howard contacted Goose Bay by radio and an F-94 fighter was diverted to intercept them, but before it reached the scene, 'the small objects seemed to enter the larger [UFO], and then the big one shrank'.

Howard's report was reported to the Air Ministry and investigated by Project Blue Book, who decided it was possible the UFOs were a mirage of a bright planet created by unusual weather conditions. However, when pressed by the BBC, Captain Howard said there was 'no question that this was not an illusion… and that it was being intelligently handled'.[3] In 2010 UFOlogist Martin Shough carried out a thorough cold case review of the evidence, including the crew's original statements and contemporary weather data. His report concludes that Captain Howard and his crew did see an unusual mirage. And far from being rare, he discovered this sighting was just one of 'an unrecognised class of very similar mirage observations from aircraft' that may

have given rise to other classic UFO reports in the past.[4]

UFO reports from aircrew are regarded as particularly persuasive evidence, as pilots are trained observers who often have a great number of years of flying experience. Captain Howard's sighting was the first of many by civilian pilots to receive wide publicity in Britain, but until 1968 there was no formal procedure whereby aircrew could file their reports directly with the Ministry of Defence. As a result news of some incidents never reached the MoD or arrived so late that investigation was impossible, as vital evidence, such as radar tapes, had been erased. But as a direct result of the UFO flap of 1967 (see p. 75), the MoD was forced to improve the system whereby they received UFO reports from a range of official sources such as the police and airports.

From January 1968 all air traffic control centres were instructed to report any unusual sightings directly to RAF West Drayton so they could be investigated quickly. A version of these instructions remain part of the Manual of Air Traffic Control, the service's reference book, to this day (see p. 177). In addition, the Civil Aviation Authority has, since 1976, kept a record of UFO incidents reported by British aircrew alongside a range of other more commonplace hazards. Known as Mandatory Occurrence Reports, these range from other aircraft that stray from their flight plan to incidents involving microlites, gliders and hot-air balloons. In those cases where crews report a near-miss with another aircraft, an independent team of experts is called in to investigate. The task of the Joint Air-miss Working Group, which is made up of both military and civilian aviation specialists, is to assess the possibility of a collision and, where possible, take steps to reduce future risks.

But when a near-miss is reported as having involved a UFO the team has found it difficult to reach any definitive conclusions, as such incidents cannot be neatly pigeonholed into any tangible hazard category. As a result, the potential risks posed by UFOs – as in something real but unknown – have tended to be downplayed by both the MoD and the Joint Airmiss Working Group, which have dealt with unexplained incidents on a case-by-case basis.

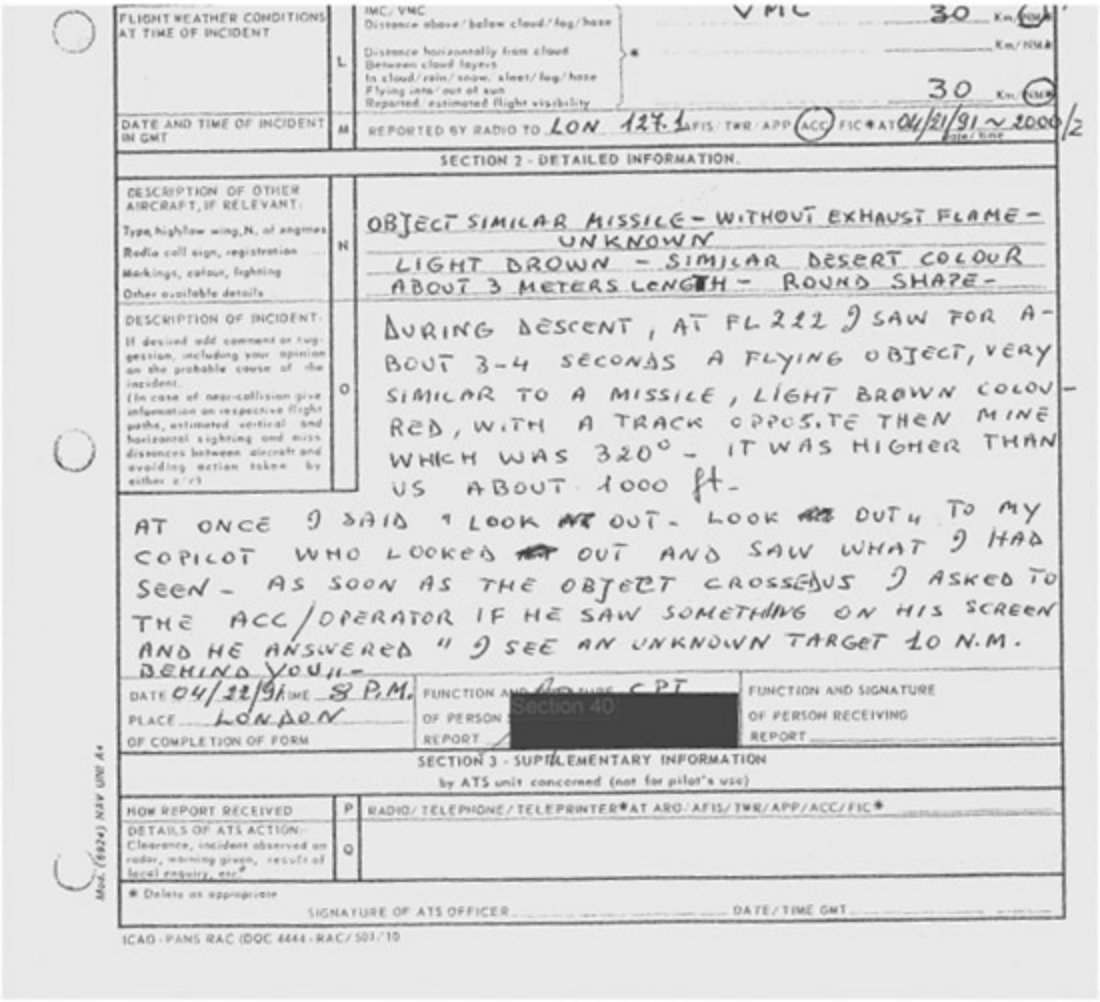
The MoD's informal policy of ignoring potential hazards to aircraft presented by UFOs is illustrated by files at The National Archives that cover a 1977 review of policy. During a frank exchange of views within the MoD, an intelligence officer said reports of UFOs in the busy air lines over the English Channel raised 'flight safety questions'. Responding to his concerns, Wing

Commander D. B. Hamley of the RAF's Inspectorate of Flight Safety admitted the MoD's attitude to UFOs was 'ostrich-like', adding: 'If we do not look, it will go away. If it does not officially exist, I cannot get terribly worked up if someone sees one, in the "busy air lanes over the Channel" or anywhere else.'[5]

ON COLLISION COURSE!

This 'ostrich-like' official attitude towards reports of near-misses between aircraft and UFOs continued into the 1990s when a spate of disturbing incidents occurred over the British Isles. Although many of these were reported by the media at the time, full details of the official investigations and their findings did not emerge until the relevant MoD files were opened by The National Archives from 2008.

The most surprising fact to emerge was that the most dramatic encounter recorded in the files was never subject to a full 'airmiss' inquiry. The files reveal this report was investigated internally by the MoD, although the captain reported it officially as a near-collision with an unidentified flying object. On 21 April 1991 Captain Achille Zaghetti, the pilot of Alitalia Flight AZ 284 carrying 57 passengers en route from Milan, was on his final descent into Heathrow Airport. The jet had crossed the Channel coast and was around 6 miles west of Lydd in Kent and under London Air Traffic control. It was around 8.00 pm and still light when, according to the captain's handwritten report: 'during descent, at [22,200 ft] I saw for about 3–4 seconds a flying object, very similar to a missile, light brown coloured… with a track opposite than mine… It was higher than us, about 1000 ft. At once I said: "Look Out! Look Out!" to my co-pilot who looked out and saw what I had seen. As soon as the object crossed us I asked [Heathrow] if he saw something on his screen and he answered "I see an unknown target 10 [nautical miles] behind you."[6]



FLIGHT WEATHER CONDITIONS AT TIME OF INCIDENT — L — IMC / VMC — Distance above / below cloud / fog / haze — Distance horizontally from cloud — Between cloud layers — In cloud / rain / snow, sleet / fog / haze — Flying into / out of sun — Reported / estimated flight visibility — VMC — 30 Km/NM — 30 Km/NM

DATE AND TIME OF INCIDENT IN GMT — M — REPORTED BY RADIO TO LON 127.1 AFIS / TWR / APP / ACC / FIC AT 04/21/91 ~ 2000 Date / Time — 1/2

SECTION 2 - DETAILED INFORMATION.

DESCRIPTION OF OTHER AIRCRAFT, IF RELEVANT: Type, high/low wing, N. of engines; Radio call sign, registration; Markings, colour, lighting; Other available details — N

OBJECT SIMILAR MISSILE - WITHOUT EXHAUST FLAME - UNKNOWN
LIGHT BROWN - SIMILAR DESERT COLOUR
ABOUT 3 METERS LENGTH - ROUND SHAPE -

DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT: If desired add comment or suggestion, including your opinion on the probable cause of the incident. (In case of near-collision give information on respective flight paths, estimated vertical and horizontal sighting and miss distances between aircraft and avoiding action taken by either a/c) — O

DURING DESCENT, AT FL 222 I SAW FOR ABOUT 3-4 SECONDS A FLYING OBJECT, VERY SIMILAR TO A MISSILE, LIGHT BROWN COLOURED, WITH A TRACK OPPOSITE THEN MINE WHICH WAS 320° - IT WAS HIGHER THAN US ABOUT 1000 ft.

AT ONCE I SAID " LOOK OUT - LOOK OUT " TO MY COPILOT WHO LOOKED OUT AND SAW WHAT I HAD SEEN - AS SOON AS THE OBJECT CROSSED US I ASKED TO THE ACC / OPERATOR IF HE SAW SOMETHING ON HIS SCREEN AND HE ANSWERED " I SEE AN UNKNOWN TARGET 10 N.M. BEHIND YOU ".-

DATE 04/22/91 TIME 8 P.M. PLACE LONDON OF COMPLETION OF FORM — FUNCTION AND SIGNATURE OF PERSON REPORT [redacted] Section 40 — CPT — FUNCTION AND SIGNATURE OF PERSON RECEIVING REPORT

SECTION 3 - SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION by ATS unit concerned (not for pilot's use)

HOW REPORT RECEIVED — P — RADIO / TELEPHONE / TELEPRINTER * AT ARO / AFIS / TWR / APP / ACC / FIC *

DETAILS OF ATS ACTION: Clearance, incident observed on radar, warning given, results of local enquiry, etc* — Q

* Delete as appropriate

SIGNATURE OF ATS OFFICER ..... DATE / TIME GMT .....

ICAO - PANS RAC (DOC 4444 - RAC / 501 / 10

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The ‘near collision’ report made by Captain Achille Zaghetti, the pilot of Alitalia Flight AZ 284, to the Civil Aviation Authority following his close encounter with a missile-shaped UFO over Lydd, Kent, in April 1991. DEFE 24/1923/1.

The air traffic controller's report confirmed that 'at the time of the incident a primary response was observed behind [the aircraft] tracking northeast', but checks with coastguards, police and the army failed to identify it. A replay of the radar tapes revealed the track of the 'primary contact' had been recorded on film and scribbled on one of the sheets are the words: 'Possible slow-moving target – Cruise Missile?'.

The Sunday Times reported the outcome of inquiries that had been made by the MoD to trace the origin of the mysterious 'missile' and quoted an aviation expert who said it was possible the object could have been a stray military target or 'drone' used for air defence practice. Initially, it certainly seemed possible that whatever the captain had seen came from the nearby army ranges at Lydd or from a ship at sea. However, the file on the incident makes it clear that the MoD soon ruled this out.

Their investigation ended two months later when it became apparent they were unable to explain the incident. The MoD's bland conclusion simply read: 'In the absence of any clear evidence which could be used to identify the object it is our intention to treat this sighting like that of any other Unidentified Flying Object and therefore we will not be able to undertake any further investigation into the sighting.'[7]

This incident was just the tip of a small iceberg. During the summer of 1991 there were a further six UFO reports made by airline crews and passengers but only one of these was subject to a detailed investigation by the 'airmiss' working group.

On 15 July the crew of a Britannia Airways Boeing 737 returning from Greece and descending into Gatwick under London control at 14,000 ft saw 'a small, black lozenge-shaped object' zoom past at high speed just 100 yds off the port side of the aircraft. Gatwick confirmed a 'primary contact' was visible on radar 10 nautical miles behind the 737 moving at a speed estimated at 120 mph. Immediately air traffic control warned a following aircraft which made 'avoiding turns to the left to avoid the [UFO], which had appeared to change heading towards it, but its pilot reported seeing nothing'. This incident could not be ignored and a formal 'airmiss' investigation was opened. In their report, completed in April 1992, the working group said they 'were unsure what damage could have occurred had the object struck the 737; the general opinion was that there had been a possible risk of collision.'[8]

The working group admitted they could not explain the incident but

suggested the ‘unidentified object’ that came so close to the 737 might have been an escaped balloon. Shortly after their report was completed, the Civil Aviation Authority’s in-house magazine, Airways, published a photograph of a toy balloon called the ‘UFO Solar’. Manufactured in Europe and costing just 99p, when inflated the balloon was 10 ft in length, black, lozenge-shaped and – according to the makers – capable of reaching ‘extraordinary altitudes’ up to 30,000 ft. It cannot be doubted the appearance of this balloon fits some aspects of the crew’s story, but as in many UFO incidents it is never possible to say conclusively: ‘case closed’.

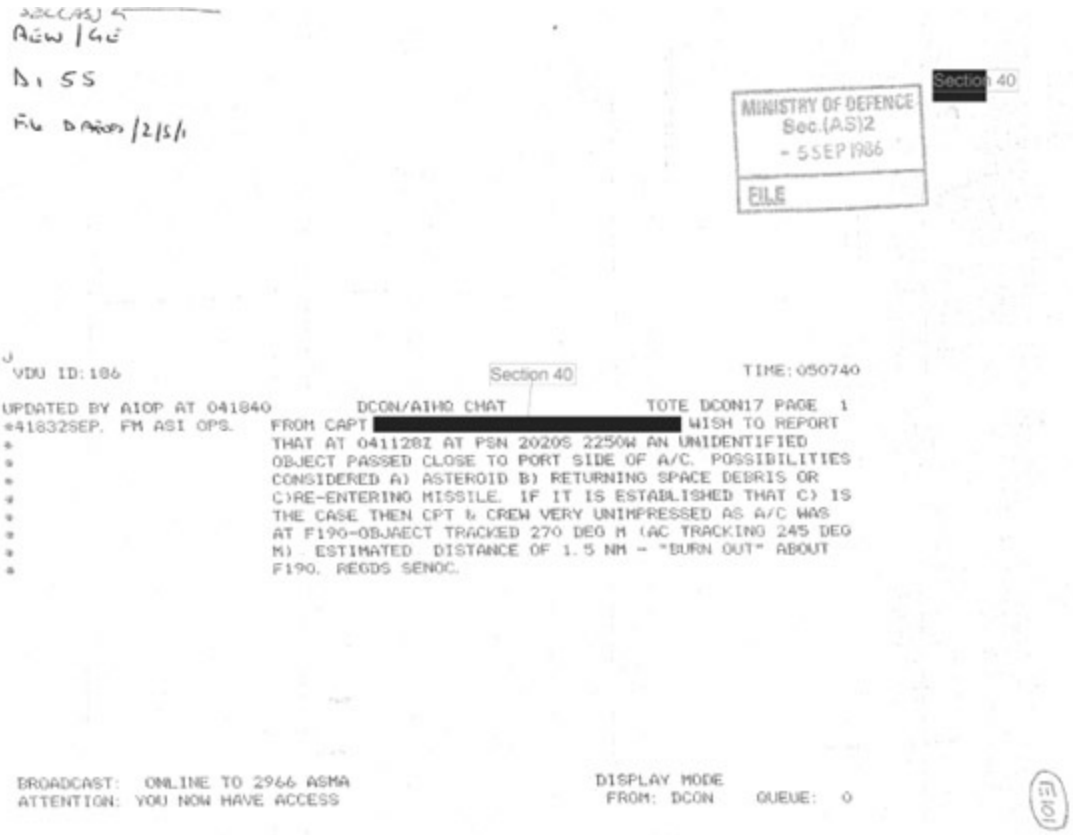
Balloons are unlikely to have been responsible for another airmiss incident reported by a British Airways crew, this time near Manchester Airport. At 6.45 pm on 6 January 1995 their Boeing 737, carrying 60 passengers from Milan, had descended to 4,000 ft above the Peak District hills in preparation for landing. The 737 was cruising just above the clouds and visibility was at least 10 miles when, without warning, a glowing wedge-shaped object appeared following a course directly towards the plane.

Captain Roger Wills had this exchange with air traffic controllers:

‘B-737 (6.48 pm):	… we just had something go down the [right hand side] just above us very fast.
Manchester:	Well there’s nothing on radar. Was it… an aircraft?
B-737:	Well, it had lights, it went down the starboard side very quick.
Manchester:	And above you?
B737:	… just slightly above us, yeah.’[9]

Captain Wills told the working group this UFO was in sight for just two seconds and created no noise or air displacement as it whizzed past. He said it was illuminated with a number of small lights, making it look like a Christmas tree. The first officer, Mark Stuart, told the Airmiss investigators he instinctively ducked when he saw: ‘a dark object pass down the right-hand side of the aircraft at high speed; it was wedge-shaped with what could have been a black stripe down the side… he felt sure that what he saw was a solid

object – not a bird, balloon or kite.’



AGW/GE

D: 55

FILE D/AGOS/2/5/1

[redacted]

MINISTRY OF DEFENCE
Sec.(AS)2
- 5 SEP 1986
FILE

VDU ID:186 TIME:050740

UPDATED BY AIOP AT 041840 DCON/AIHQ CHAT TOTE DCON17 PAGE 1
*41832SEP. FM ASI OPS. FROM CAPT [redacted] WISH TO REPORT
THAT AT 041128Z AT PSN 2020S 2250W AN UNIDENTIFIED
OBJECT PASSED CLOSE TO PORT SIDE OF A/C. POSSIBILITIES
CONSIDERED A) ASTEROID B) RETURNING SPACE DEBRIS OR
C)RE-ENTERING MISSILE. IF IT IS ESTABLISHED THAT C) IS
THE CASE THEN CPT & CREW VERY UNIMPRESSED AS A/C WAS
AT F190-OBJAECT TRACKED 270 DEG M (AC TRACKING 245 DEG
M). ESTIMATED DISTANCE OF 1.5 NM - "BURN OUT" ABOUT
F190. REGDS SENOC.

BROADCAST: ONLINE TO 2966 ASMA
ATTENTION: YOU NOW HAVE ACCESS

DISPLAY MODE
FROM: DCON QUEUE: 0

One of many reports by civilian aircrew of near-misses with UFOs; this example was reported to MoD by the captain of an airliner flying over the South Atlantic on 5 September 1986. DEFE 24/1924/1

The investigation was unable to trace any civilian or military aircraft and ruled out a stray hang-glider or night-flying microlite as being 'extremely unlikely'. But although they could not identify the object, the working group pointed out that almost all unusual sightings of this kind 'can be explained by a range of known natural phenomena'.

One possibility independently proposed by astronomer Ian Ridpath and UFOlogist Jenny Randles was a fireball meteor. They pointed out that it was not unusual for experienced pilots to misidentify such bright fireballs as they tend to appear and disappear suddenly, without warning. In darkness, with no reference points, it would be easy to conclude an object was alarmingly close to their aircraft when in fact it was many miles away, burning up in the upper atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the airmiss working group commended the two pilots for their courage in submitting their report. They noted that sightings by aircrew: 'are often the object of derision, but the Group hopes that this example will encourage pilots who experience unusual sightings to report them without fear of ridicule.' Their report, published in February 1996, decided there was no doubt that both: 'saw an object… that was of sufficient significance to prompt an airmiss report. Unfortunately the nature and identity of this object remains unknown. To speculate about extraterrestrial activity, fascinating though it may be, is not within the Group's remit and must be left to those whose interest lies in this field.'[10]

UFO OR BLACK PROJECT?

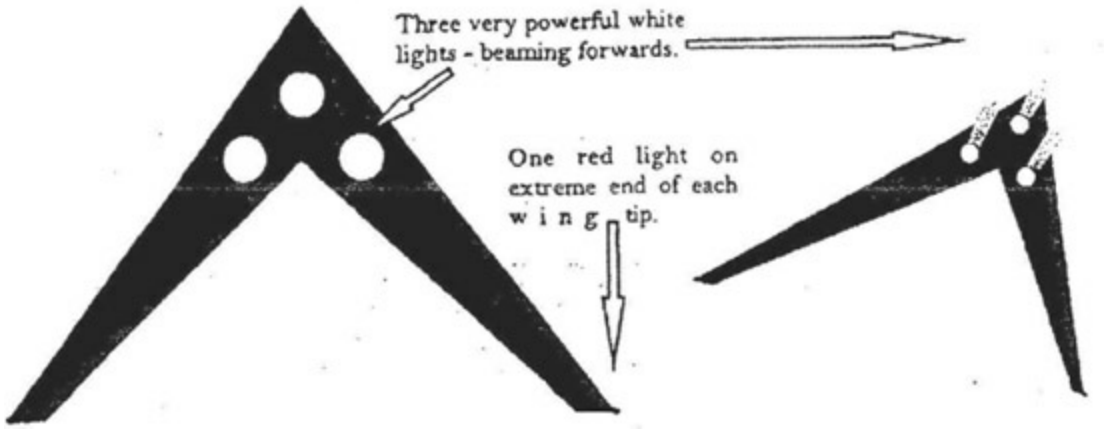
Near collisions with unidentified objects, such as those reported by pilots like David Hastings and Achille Zaghetti, highlight the frequent links between the UFO phenomenon and military secrets. The most recent MoD files released by The National Archives contain many hints that certain types of experimental military aircraft have been seen and reported as UFOs in recent years.

For example, in 2001 a resident of Stroud contacted his MP, David Drew, to report his sighting of 'a very unusual aircraft' flying above the Gloucestershire countryside. The letter says he was out walking at 9.30 pm on 3 September 2000 when his attention was drawn to a large object 'looming up over the skyline'. He continued: 'This was no ordinary aircraft as it was black all over with no tail section that I could determine and it had three very

powerful beams of light, lighting up ahead of the aircraft. All three lights emanated from underneath the aircraft from dome-like globes and were set in a triangular shape. The only other lights were extremely small red lights on the extreme tips of each wing, the wings… were extremely long and much larger than any plane I had seen before… The engines were very quiet, something like Rolls Royce turbines… [and] the plane passed over me and to my right side heading in the direction of Bisley.'[11]

A drawing of the 'unusual aircraft' sent to the MP by the witness (see p. 140), so resembled the appearance of American 'Stealth' aircraft that UFO desk officer Linda Unwin decided to check with the US 3rd Air Force at RAF Mildenhall in Suffolk. They said there was 'no unusual US aircraft activity over [the] UK' at the relevant time.

This was just one of many similar sightings of silent, triangular-shaped UFOs reported from parts of Britain and Europe since the end of the Cold War. In 1990 sightings by police officers and civilians became so frequent in Belgium that on one occasion the Belgian air force scrambled F-16 fighters to investigate. At a subsequent press conference General Wilfried de Brouwer, Chief of Operations with the Belgian Air Force, admitted their pilots had detected something on radar that remained unexplained.[12] Were these nocturnal craft, as many suspected at the time, a new American stealth aircraft operating secretly from RAF bases in Britain, or were they a UK-designed prototype developed using cutting-edge technology?



A sketch featuring a 'flying triangle' UFO seen in Gloucestershire during 2000. Reports of huge stealth-like UFOs became popular from the late 1970s. Coincidentally, massive wedge-shaped Imperial Star Destroyer spaceships appear in the science fiction film Star Wars (1977) and its sequels. DEFE 24/2034/1

The Cold War came to an end with the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, but mutual suspicions continued on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Old habits die hard and during the decade that followed, even former allies began to suspect each other of using high performance aircraft to spy upon their territory. At the same time, there was a natural temptation on behalf of some aviation journalists and their sources in the defence industry to attribute impressive UFO sightings to advanced 'black projects'. In many cases, the truth often turned out to be more mundane.

In 1990 the crews of six RAF Tornado jets were taking part in an exercise at 27,000 ft over Germany on the evening of 5 November under the control of Dutch military radar. As darkness fell at 6.00 pm their aircraft were suddenly overtaken by a large flying object. In a military signal to RAF West Drayton, the RAF flight commander described how the UFO 'went into our 12 o'clock [position] and accelerated away'. He described seeing an object surrounded by 'five to six white steady lights [and] one blue steady light [with] contrails from [the] blue area'. The crews discussed their experience and decided the UFO could have been the American Stealth fighter.

Although still a military secret, this aircraft was frequently in the news after photographs showing its distinctive triangular profile were declassified. Commenting upon their report, an intelligence officer wrote: 'Clearly the incident happened and clearly the pilots saw what they believe (with hindsight) to be a Stealth aircraft [but] I doubt very much if the USAF or even the Soviet Air Force (if they were flying) would admit to anything.'[13]

A file opened by The National Archives in 2009 reveals the MoD did not investigate the Tornado crews' report because it occurred outside UK airspace, but officials evidently suspected some type of 'black project' aircraft was involved. If they had made further inquiries they would have discovered other sightings had been made by aircrews elsewhere in Europe at the same date and time, some of which described loud bangs as the formation of lights moved through the sky. Space tracking stations identified these lights as the debris from a Soviet rocket which had earlier launched the Gorizont 21 communications satellite into orbit.

TOP
FEED DIRECTION

UNCLASSIFIED

CWD197 06/1542 310C2587

FOR CAB

ROUTINE 061340Z NOV 90

FROM RAF WEST DRAYTON
TO MODUK AIR

UNCLASSIFIED
SIC Z6F
SUBJECT: AERIAL PHENOMENA
A. 5 NOV 1800Z
B. ONE LARGE AEROPLANE (SHAPE). 5 TO 6 WHITE STEADY LIGHTS. 1 SIZE
STEADY LIGHT. CONTRAILS FROM BLUE AREA
C. IN THE AIR M.C.6 AREA. FL270 YPENBURG
D. NAKED EYE
E. HEADING 100 DEGREES. SAME ALT FL270
F. INTO OUR 12 OCLOCK
G. ONE QUARTER MILE AHEAD
H. STEADY
J. N/K
K. N/K
L. WORKING DUTCH MILL RADAR
M. SQNLDR Section 40 2 AC SQN

PAGE 2 R9DAID 0009 UNCLAS
N. NIL
O. 2 OTHERS FROM LAARBRUCH
P. OTHER INFO. AIRCRAFT WAS UNDER DUTCH MIL CONTROL UFO APPERRED IN
OUR RH SIDE SAME LEVEL. WE WERE TRAVELLING AT MACH POINT 8. IT WENT
INTO OUR 12 OCLOCK AND ACCLLERATED AWAY. ANOTHER 2 TORNADOS SEEN IT
AND POSSIBLE IDENTED IT AS A STEALTH AIRCRAFT
BT

DISTRIBUTION

The report received by the MoD from the pilots of a group of RAF Tornados who reported being overtaken by a UFO whilst on exercise over Germany in November 1990. They suspected the UFO was the then secret United States Air Force Stealth fighter. DEFE 31/180/1

The Tornado pilot who reported the sighting remains unconvinced by this explanation. In a 2003 letter to UFOlogist Richard Foxhall, he says: 'This was definitely not a Russian satellite – I'm 100% certain of that… the UFO did not look like any aircraft that I know to be in service with any air force either today or at the time… .'[14]

THE COSFORD INCIDENT

Alongside this can be placed the events that occurred in the early hours of 30/31 March 1993 when another UFO flap set phones jangling in the small Whitehall office that dealt with unusual sightings. Files released by The National Archives in 2009 show the MoD alone received more than 30 separate sighting reports on this night, including accounts from police officers in Devon and Cornwall who saw 'two very bright lights hovering at about 2,000 ft (600 m)'. Another report was filed by a military patrol at RAF Cosford, near Wolverhampton, who saw 'two bright lights in the sky above the airfield… flying at great velocity'. Their report described the lights as silent, 'circular in shape and [they] gave off no beam… creamy white in colour and constant in size and shape'. A slight red glow could be seen from the rear of the lights before they disappeared over the horizon in a southeasterly direction. Most of the other witnesses described seeing a formation of two or three white lights with vapour trails moving swiftly across the sky in a similar direction. Some claimed the lights appeared in a triangular formation.

The MoD's UFO desk officer, Nick Pope, was so worried by this flap he asked the RAF to examine radar tapes from the night in question, but nothing unusual could be seen. He later briefed the head of Sec(AS) that if a UFO really was operating over the UK 'without being detected on radar this would… be of considerable defence significance' and he recommended that 'we investigate further'.

It later emerged that most of these sightings could be traced to the decay into Earth's atmosphere of a Russian rocket used to launch the Cosmos 2238 spy satellite into orbit. This explanation was confirmed when news arrived of similar sightings made in Ireland and France on the same evening. When Pope was sent a copy of a French Space Agency report on the sightings in 1994 he conceded that 'it is clear that most of the UFO sightings that occurred on the night in question can be attributed to this event'.[15] UK astronomer Gary

Anthony and NASA space debris expert Dr Nick Johnson have since produced a computer simulation of the trajectory followed by the debris that neatly explains the majority of sightings reported that night.

But before full details of this explanation had emerged, some MoD officials appear to have convinced themselves that the 'Cosford flap', as it became known, was caused by a genuine UFO. On 22 April the head of the UFO desk took matters a step further by sending a memo to the Assistant Chief of Air Staff, Sir Anthony Bagnall, that claimed: 'there would seem to be some evidence… that an unidentified object (or objects) of unknown origin was operating over the UK'. He added: 'If there has been some activity of US origins which is known to a limited circle in MoD and is not being acknowledged it is difficult to investigate further.'[16] Bagnall decided to take no further action and soon afterwards Pope's superior advised him, in a hand-written note: 'I suggest you now drop this subject.'

During the First World War, when reports of phantom Zeppelins flooded into the War Office, some officials were prepared to believe at least some of these UFOs really were airships, until it became obvious this was not possible. Likewise, in the 1990s their successors at the MoD suspected that advanced spy planes or even aliens might be responsible for some UFO flaps. For a time the UFO desk adopted the mantra of the popular TV series, The X-Files: 'I want to believe.'

AURORA – THE PLANE THAT NEVER EXISTED

In the 1980s a detachment of SR-71 spy planes was based at RAF Mildenhall, Suffolk, headquarters of the US 3rd Air Force in the UK, until shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall. During this period rumours spread that Mildenhall and other United States Air Force bases in England were being used by other black project aircraft, particularly during the period of NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia, where the F-117 fighter saw action. This coincided with a dramatic rise in the number of sightings of UFOs such as those reported in Belgium and Gloucestershire (see p. 140). They were often called 'Silent Vulcans' owing to their sleek delta-winged shape, huge size and apparently silent flight. But oddly, despite their unconventional shape, these UFOs often displayed the flashing white strobes and rotating red and green beacons that are the standard aircraft lighting systems used for night-flying.

Stealth technology has advanced in leaps and bounds since the F-117 and the B-2 bomber were removed from the secret list, and speculation has continued to grow about what might constitute the next generation of 'black project' aircraft. From the late 1980s, rumours spread that the United States Department of Defense was testing a highly advanced hypersonic aircraft as a replacement for the ageing SR-71. The mystery began in 1985 when a Pentagon budget report listed a project called 'Aurora' alongside the SR-71, apparently by mistake. The United States Air Force later explained the error by claiming the name was used in the document to conceal the existence of another then-secret project, the B-2 Stealth bomber. By then it was impossible to put the genie back inside the bottle.

Although Secretary of the Air Force, Donald Rice, went on record to flatly deny such a project existed, throughout the 1990s sightings of the Aurora frequently made headlines in UFO magazines and specialist aviation journals such as Jane's Defence Weekly. The Aurora was said to be capable of incredible feats, such as high altitude flight at Mach 8 at a top speed of 5,300 mph (8,530 km/h). In 1992 The Scotsman published a story that claimed an anonymous air traffic controller had seen a fast-moving blip 'emerge from the area of the joint NATO–RAF station at RAF Machrihanish at approximately three times the speed of sound'. Puzzled by the experience, he called up the remote airfield on the tip of the Kintyre peninsula but was told to forget what he had seen.[17]

This story prompted Scottish MPs to ask in Parliament if permission had been given to the Americans for secret flights through British airspace. Privately, the MoD advised Defence Secretary Tom King on 2 March 1992 that the last SR-71 left the UK from RAF Mildenhall in 1990 but the confidential briefing added cryptically: 'There may or may not be an Aurora project. There is no knowledge in MoD of a "black" programme of this nature, although it would not surprise the relevant desk officers in the Air Staff and DIS if it did exist.'[18]

Despite denials, the Aurora story refused to die. When in December 1992 Jane's Defence Weekly published a statement from an impressive eyewitness, relations between the US and UK were put under further strain. Chris Gibson's account was the most credible to emerge from the welter of rumours that preceded it. He was a member of the Royal Observer Corps and an expert in aircraft identification, so his account of what he saw flying low over the North

Sea one afternoon in August 1989 carries the weight of experience. Gibson was working on an oil rig at Galveston Key, about 100 miles northeast of Great Yarmouth, at the time. His attention was attracted by a colleague who returned from the deck calling out: ‘ “Have a look at this”: I looked up, saw a KC-135 tanker and two [USAF] F-111s, but was amazed to see the triangle. I am trained in instant recognition, but this triangle had me stopped dead. My first thought was that it was another F-111, but… it was too long and it didn’t look like one. My next thought was that it was an F-117, as the highly swept platform of the [Stealth fighter] had just been made public. Again the triangle was too long and had no gaps.’[19]

Gibson was left struggling for ideas and as the formation passed by he realised the two men had seen something that did not officially exist. On checking his aircraft recognition manual, he found nothing matched and immediately sat down to sketch what he had seen. Publication of his drawings prompted the British Air Attaché in Washington to write to the Air Staff in London for advice on what he should tell the Americans. His letter, dated 22 December 1992, read: ‘[The US] Secretary of the Air Force, the Honorable Donald B. Rice, was to say the least incensed by the renewed speculation, and the implied suggestion that he had lied to Congress by stating that Aurora did not exist… the whole affair is causing considerable irritation within HQ [US Air Force] and any helpful comments we can make to defuse the situation would be appreciated.’[20]

To date, no convincing explanation for the North Sea sighting has been provided by the MoD and the United States has never confirmed the existence of the mysterious Aurora. Writing in 1997 Gibson concluded: ‘Whether this aircraft was Aurora is debatable [and] my background precludes jumping to conclusions based on a single piece of evidence. I don’t know what it was, but it was the only aircraft I have ever seen that I could not identify.’[21]

LOOSE MINUTE

D/Sec(AS)12/2

19 February 1992

DPO(RAF)
AF Ops

Copy to:
DI55c
GR3
RAF West Drayton - AIS(Mil), LATCC

RECENT UFO SIGHTINGS OVER LONDON

1. Many addressees will be aware that there has been a recent spate of UFO sightings over the London area. Witnesses describe a large saucer or cigar-shaped luminous object, with a red flashing light underneath. Some witnesses also report having heard the sound of an engine.

2. Any report that fits this pattern is almost certain to have been the airship that has been flying over London recently - the main body of which is strongly illuminated. I have actually seen it myself from a number of angles and distances, and can appreciate why many people are filing UFO reports.

3. Whilst we have standard lines to take on UFOs, it is perfectly acceptable to suggest any logical explanation for a sighting to a caller, and in this instance I suspect it might put a few people's minds at rest to suggest that - if the details fit - the object that they saw was this airship.

4. I hope this is helpful.

Section 40

Sec(AS)2a

Section 40

[redacted] MINUTE

D/Sec(AS)12/1

29 Mar 93

OPO(RAF)
AFOPS

Copy to:
DI55c
GE3(RAF)
AIS(Mil)

[redacted]

89

UFO File

UFO SIGHTINGS OVER LONDON

1. Addressees are probably aware that there has been a spate of recent UFO sightings in and around London, most notably in the Ilford and Romford areas.

2. Witnesses have reported a bright cigar-shaped object, moving very slowly, and making little or no sound.

3. The object almost certainly responsible for these sightings is a brightly illuminated airship; this craft is operated by [redacted] and is advertising the new Ford Mondeo. The CAA have confirmed that this airship has been operating over London and the surrounding area for the last week or so. Addressees may wish to offer this information as a potential explanation should they receive any more such reports.

[redacted]

Sec(AS)2a

[redacted]

UFO desk officer Nick Pope warns MoD branches to expect sightings of a bright cigar-shaped UFO over London in the spring of 1993. This flap was traced to an illuminated airship advertising the launch of the Ford Mondeo. DEFE 31/181/1 and DEFE 24/1954/1.

OPEN SKIES?

Public fascination with UFOs, alien abductions and crop circles peaked in the mid-1990s, partly as a result of the popularity of the hit US TV series The X-Files. The fictional plot embraced UFO conspiracy theories and series creator Chris Carter's storyline appeared to reflect widespread suspicion that governments were hiding facts about UFOs and aliens from the public.

Shortly after the series aired on British TV, a serving MoD official went public with what the press began to call 'Britain's real X-files'. In 1996 Nick Pope published a personal account of his tour of duty on the UFO desk, which resulted in his conversion to a believer in UFOs. The cover blurb for his book Open Skies, Closed Minds proclaimed the three years he spent researching the subject at the MoD (1991–4) had changed his life: 'from starting out as a sceptic, he became a firm believer in the reality of UFOs.' Drawing upon cases that impressed him as evidential, such as the Rendlesham incident and the Cosford UFO flap, he concluded that 'extraterrestrial spacecraft are visiting Earth and that something should be done about it urgently'.

This public declaration, from a former MoD official, went much further than any previous statement from more senior officials such as Ralph Noyes (see p. 49). In fact Pope's statements in his book, as well as in a series of TV and radio programmes, directly contradicted his own department's long-standing policy, repeated in all correspondence with the public. For if UFOs were of 'no defence significance', here was someone who was responsible for implementing this policy who clearly did not believe it. According to Pope's own account, some former colleagues were unhappy with the content of his book and attempts were made to block its publication. Fortunately, the risks of censorship in a new era of open government overcame these objections but Pope's employers pointed out that 'clearance to publish does not imply MoD approval of, or agreement with, the contents.' A press briefing drawn up by the MoD made it clear that Pope's views were his own opinions and did not reflect official policy on UFOs.

Nevertheless, files released by the MoD in 2007 under the Freedom of Information Act have revealed that other defence officials privately shared Nick Pope's belief that some UFOs could be spacecraft piloted by extraterrestrials. The evidence suggests this was not because, as some have claimed, they had privileged access to hard evidence that was being concealed

from the public. Rather, they reached their conclusions by reading and watching the same books and TV programmes that were widely available to everyone else. From the 1950s onwards, some have been inclined to believe the 'Extra Terrestrial Hypothesis' (ETH), while others have dismissed the subject as being irrelevant.

Early in the 1990s it seems the faction who wanted to believe began to gain some small influence on the MoD's UFO policy. During August 1993 a RAF Wing Commander working for the Defence Intelligence Staff lobbied MoD officials at a Whitehall briefing on the need for a properly funded study of UFOs. He opened his case by stating: 'I am well aware that anyone who talks about UFOs is treated with a certain degree of suspicion. I am briefing on the topic because DI55 have a UFO responsibility, not because I talk to little green men every night!'[22]

This official, whose name has been blacked out along with all others in the most recent documents released by the MoD, continued: 'the national security implications [of UFOs] are considerable. We have many reports of strange objects in the skies and we have never investigated them.' He said if the sightings were caused by American stealth aircraft then these would not constitute a threat, 'although it would be most alarming if the craft were using UK airspace without authority'. If on the other hand they were of Russian or even Chinese origin, there would be a clear threat and '[MoD would] urgently need to establish the nature of the craft and its capabilities.' He then turned to extraterrestrials: 'If the sightings are of devices not of the earth then their purpose needs to be established as a matter of priority. There has been no apparently hostile intent and other possibilities are: (1) military reconnaissance, (2) scientific, (3) tourism.'

The Wing Commander said the key priority for the MoD was 'Technology Transfer', which he explained in this way: 'if the reports are taken at face value then devices exist that do not use conventional reaction propulsion systems, they have a very wide range of speeds and are stealthy. I suggest we could use this technology, if it exists.'[23]

Against this background, intelligence officers argued that the MoD could be placed in a vulnerable position if they were ever questioned in Parliament on the basis of their public stance that UFOs were 'of no defence significance'. This internal debate came to a head in 1995 when a collection of files were opened at The National Archives, under the 30-year rule, that revealed UFO

reports had been routinely copied to Defence Intelligence branches since the 1950s. When officials realised these documents were now in the public domain an exasperated intelligence officer wrote to the 'UFO desk': 'I see no reason for continuing to deny that [Defence Intelligence] has an interest in UFOs. However, if the association is formally made public, then the MoD will no doubt be pressurised to state what the intelligence role/interest is. This could lead to disbelief and embarrassment since few people are likely to believe the truth that lack of funds and higher priorities have prevented any study of the thousands of reports received.'[24]

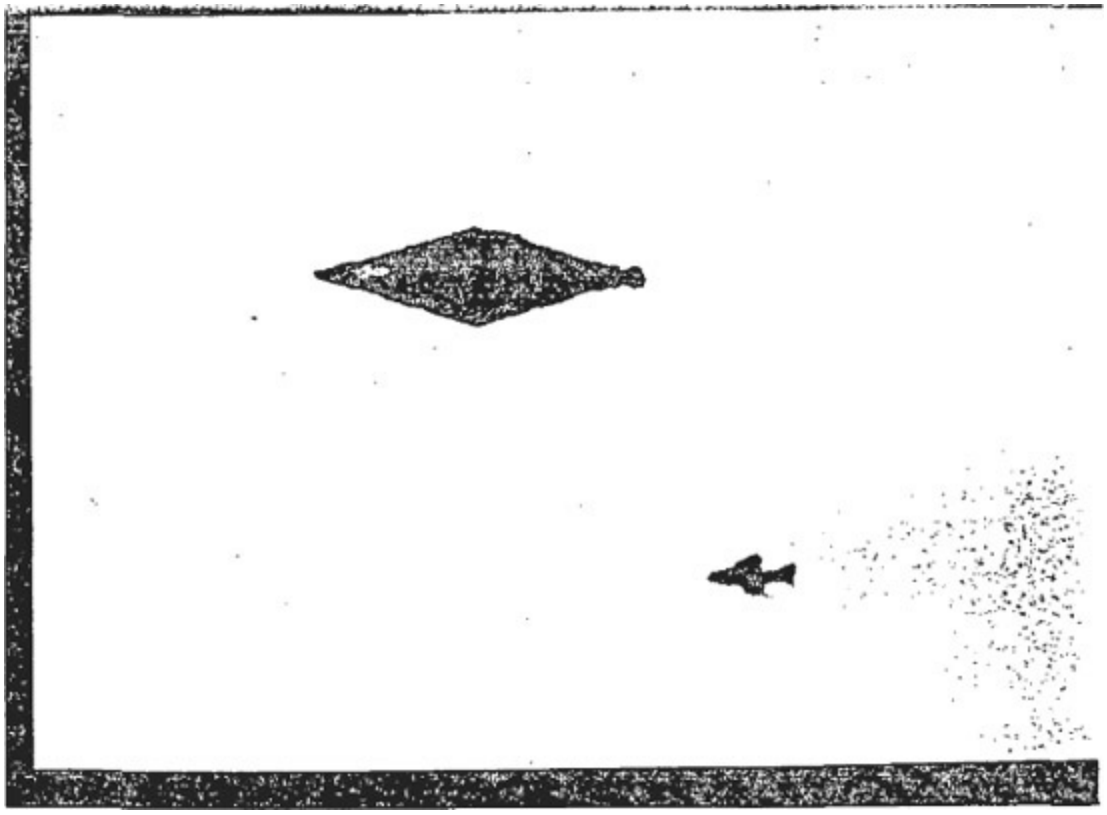
In the margin of this sentence a UFO desk official scribbled: 'Ouch!'.

UFOs on Film

One snowy night, 27 January 2004, Alex Birch took a series of colour slides showing the town hall in Retford, Nottinghamshire, for submission to a photography competition. He saw nothing unusual at the time. But on examining the transparencies he was amazed to find an image showing what appears to be a classic 'flying saucer'. Having ruled out lens flares and aircraft, he contacted the Ministry of Defence. They said 'defence experts' would like to take a closer look at the mysterious 'elliptical object' that was visible on the transparency. Alex delivered the slide to the MoD Main Building and it was sent to the Defence Geographic and Imagery Intelligence Agency for computer analysis. DGIA said they were unable to calculate the size of the 'object' because its distance from the camera was unknown. In their report, dated 2 August 2004, the agency told the MoD 'no definitive conclusions' could be reached but 'it may be coincidental that the illuminated plane of the object passes through the centre of the frame, indicating a possible lens anomaly, [for example] a droplet of moisture'.[1] The story took a strange twist because this was not the first time the Ministry had been left perplexed by a photo taken by Alex Birch. He first made headlines in 1962 when, as a 14-year-old schoolboy, he took a black and white photograph showing a fleet of 'flying saucers' over Sheffield [see p. 72]. This was the second occasion that Alex's UFO images had been subjected to an inconclusive MoD investigation.[2]

An anomalous image captured by photographer Alex Birch at Retford Town Hall, Nottinghamshire, in January 2004. The image was subjected to computer analysis by MoD intelligence staff. They could not identify the ‘object’ shown. But they suspected it might be a droplet of moisture on the camera lens. DEFE 24/2060/1

It was also not the first time that the MoD had drawn upon the expertise of their image intelligence experts to help them evaluate photographs and film footage depicting aerial phenomena. In 1994 VHS footage of a strange object in the sky near Bonnybridge in Scotland was sent to experts at JARIC (RAF Brampton), the predecessor of DGIA. They concluded: 'It cannot be determined whether this object is real or a hoax – it is possible it is a hoax using a kite or video studio effects.'[3] Two years earlier, colour photographs showing a diamond-shaped UFO were taken by a man walking near the A9 at Calvine in Scotland. The photographs show the object appeared to be shadowed by a RAF Harrier jet. Desk officers from DI55 suspected the image could show a USAF black project aircraft and prints of the photographs were sent to JARIC for scrutiny. The prints subsequently disappeared and the MoD claim there is no surviving record of the conclusions reached by their covert investigation of the images.[4]



A photocopy of an original colour print showing a strange diamond-shaped UFO accompanied by a Harrier jet, seen over Calvine in Scotland in daylight one afternoon in August 1990. The MoD's Defence Intelligence Staff were unable to explain the object depicted in the photograph or trace the RAF Harrier jet also visible below the 'UFO'. DEFE 31/180/1.

This type of work triggered a sharp exchange of views within the Ministry. In public, MoD policy was they did not spend public money on UFO research. But in private, desk officers at the Defence Intelligence staff were keen to take a look at photos and films of UFOs obtained by the public. In order to do so, UFO desk officers would need authorisation to approach members of the public either by phone or by a personal visit. This was seen as a risky strategy as both the press and UFOlogists would interpret any visits from 'the men from the Ministry' as proof that a cover-up was underway.

PROJECT CONDIGN

The problem for the MoD was that if no official study had ever been carried out, how could they honestly claim that UFOs posed no threat to the defence of the realm? The existence of this Achilles heel troubled intelligence officers throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. In 1988 DI55 became embroiled in a project to produce a computerised database of UFO reports, involving a student on a work experience placement with the RAF's scientific staff. But even this 'low priority' task was halted when the news reached the head of the UFO desk. A DI55 desk officer briefed intelligence staff that: 'when Sec(AS) 2 heard about the study, they decreed that all work should cease as it was in contravention of Ministerial statements that UFOs did not pose a threat to the UK, and that resources should not be diverted from more important work to investigate UFO incidents.' He said it appeared 'there was some concern about public reaction if knowledge of the work being undertaken emerged in the media.'[25]

topic of 'UFOs' and mention is made of these aspects only where absolutely necessary as part of the wider understanding of the enigma.(K)

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

9. **Based on all the available evidence remaining in the Department (reported over the last 30 years), the information studied, either separately or corporately contained in UAP reports, leads to the conclusion that it does not have any significant Defence Intelligence value. However, the Study has uncovered a number of technological issues that may be of potential defence interest.** (K)

10. **Causes of UAP Reports** In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the **key UAP report findings** are:

- Mis-reporting of man-made vehicles, often observed by perfectly credible witnesses, but with unfamiliar or abnormal features; or in unusual circumstances.

- Reports of natural but not unusual phenomena, which are genuinely misunderstood at the time by the observer.

- The incidence of natural, but relatively rare phenomena. These may be increasing due to natural changes and possibly accelerated by man-aided factors, such as smoke and dust.

Further:

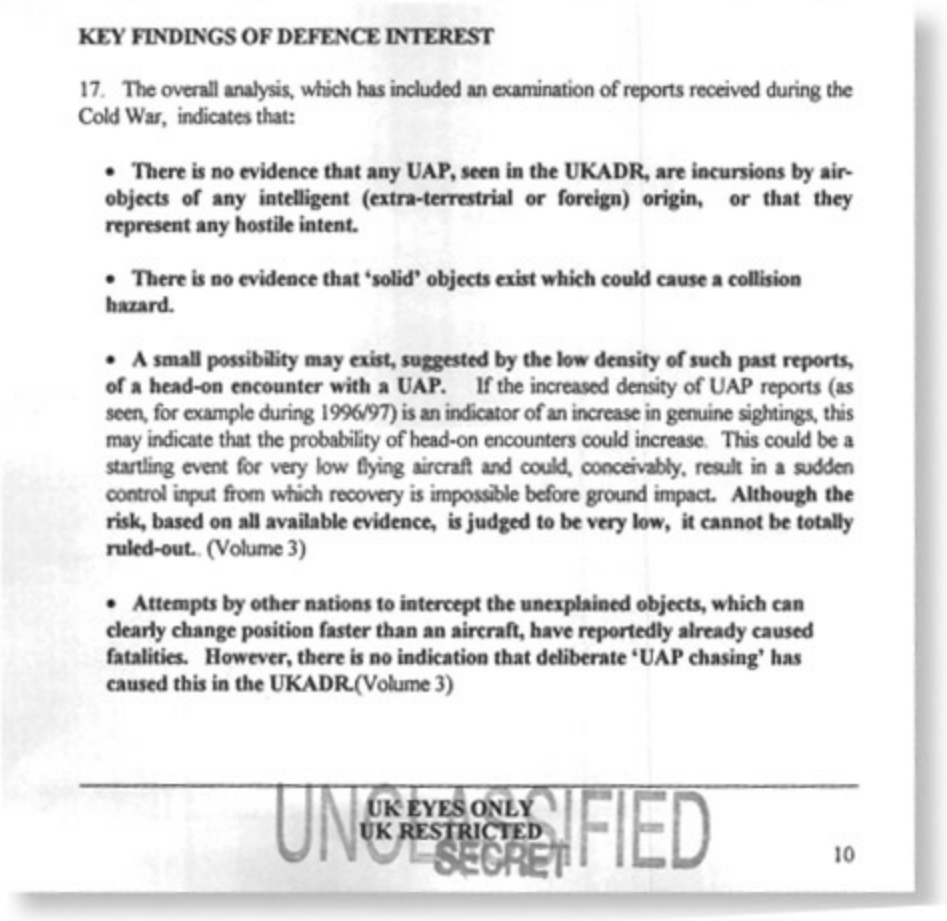
- **No evidence exists to associate the phenomena with any particular nation.**

- **No evidence exists to suggest that the phenomena seen are hostile or under any type of control, other than that of natural physical forces.**

- **Evidence suggests that meteors and their well-known effects and, possibly some other less-known effects, are responsible for some UAP.** (K)

KEY SUPPORTING FINDINGS

11. Aerial phenomena of the type consistent with those reported as UAP, and with exceptional characteristics, certainly exist - but the available evidence suggests that apart from those which can be more easily and satisfactorily explained, they are comprised of several types of rarely encountered **natural** events within the atmosphere and ionosphere.



KEY FINDINGS OF DEFENCE INTEREST

17. The overall analysis, which has included an examination of reports received during the Cold War, indicates that:

- **There is no evidence that any UAP, seen in the UKADR, are incursions by air-objects of any intelligent (extra-terrestrial or foreign) origin, or that they represent any hostile intent.**

- **There is no evidence that 'solid' objects exist which could cause a collision hazard.**

- **A small possibility may exist, suggested by the low density of such past reports, of a head-on encounter with a UAP.** If the increased density of UAP reports (as seen, for example during 1996/97) is an indicator of an increase in genuine sightings, this may indicate that the probability of head-on encounters could increase. This could be a startling event for very low flying aircraft and could, conceivably, result in a sudden control input from which recovery is impossible before ground impact. **Although the risk, based on all available evidence, is judged to be very low, it cannot be totally ruled-out.** (Volume 3)

- **Attempts by other nations to intercept the unexplained objects, which can clearly change position faster than an aircraft, have reportedly already caused fatalities. However, there is no indication that deliberate 'UAP chasing' has caused this in the UKADR.**(Volume 3)

UK EYES ONLY
UK RESTRICTED
SECRET

An extract from executive summary/final recommendations of DI55's Condign report, 'Unidentified Aerial Phenomena in the UK Air Defence Region', completed in 2000.

In 1996, after years of internal wrangling, the MoD reluctantly agreed to earmark £50,000 of public money from an existing defence contract for a UFO study that was carried out under strict secrecy. This was a momentous moment. After 50 years and thousands of reports this was the first time that a detailed study had been commissioned by the MoD to investigate whether UFOs were a real phenomenon that might pose a threat to the defence of the UK.

The man selected to conduct the study was a contractor from the aerospace industry who had acted as a special adviser to the MoD on UFOs. His identity has been withheld due to the sensitive nature of his other work for the Defence Intelligence Staff. In 1996 he was asked to carry out a study that included, as part of its remit, an assessment of any possible flight safety risks posed by what intelligence officers now routinely referred to as 'unidentified aerial phenomena' (UAP). This acronym was chosen because it was seen as avoiding both the implication of an extraterrestrial origin and the presence of some form of piloted craft. It followed that those incidents that could not be explained by MoD remained 'unidentified' rather than 'extraterrestrial'.

The UFO study was hidden by the codename 'Project Condign', a word the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'severe and well deserved (usually of punishment)'. Its terms of reference were 'to determine the potential value, if any, of UAP sighting reports to Defence Intelligence'. In addition, 'the available data [was to be] studied principally to ascertain whether there is any evidence of a threat to the UK and… to identify any potential military technologies of interest'.

Its foundation stone was a sample of UFO sightings taken from reports held in DI55 files. By the completion of the project in February 2000, details of more than 3,000 reports covering a 10-year period ending in 1997 had been manually entered into a computer database.

The retired intelligence officer who conducted the report was faced with a number of problems. Firstly, as the study was conducted in secret on a strict 'need-to-know' basis, he could not contact witnesses or consult independent experts. Secondly, the raw data upon which he relied for the study was of very poor quality. An earlier Air Ministry study in 1955 had found around 90 per cent of UFO reports could be explained if they were investigated thoroughly before the scent went cold (see p. 61). In contrast, most of the reports received by the MoD between 1987 and 1997 had simply been glanced at and then filed away.

Inevitably, the flawed methodology that underpinned Project Condign led to conclusions that were ultimately questionable. For example, the project's author concluded that, despite hundreds of UFO reports made from the ground, 'there is no firm evidence… that a RAF crew has ever encountered or evaded a low altitude UAP event'. This conclusion cannot be regarded as definitive, given the limited information available to the author; elsewhere he notes that he was unable to access the contents of intelligence files on UFOs before 1975 that would have contained detailed reports from RAF aircrew such as Michael Swiney (see p. 47). These had been destroyed years earlier when someone in the MoD decided they contained nothing of defence or historical interest.

Other sections of the study are based upon more reliable information including UFO reports made by civilian aircrew. In his discussion of this topic the author wrote: 'It is clear that unexplained airmisses are discussed among crews… It is believed that many more civil events due to UAP remain unreported. This is because… the airline crews have most probably decided that the UAP are benign, secondly they are concerned about their individual reputations as professionals and finally the effect any publicity might have on airline business.'[26]

For this section of the study the author was forced to rely upon details of just seven 'unexplained' incidents reported to the airmiss working group between 1988 and 1996, including the Manchester Airport incident (see p. 137). Of these, all but one occurred below 20,000 ft in good visibility and all were witnessed by at least two members of the flight crew. Like David Hastings, the objects they reported were 'always extremely close and closing fast' when first sighted, but the experience was so fleeting that 'no evasive action could be taken in the time available and no damage, other than a fright to the crew has occurred'. Some crews described close sightings of 'black objects' the size of small fighter aircraft. Three involved radar trackings, but just one of these was co-incident with the visual sighting.

Despite the restrictions he faced, the author of the Condign report boldly stated in his conclusions that 'the possibility exists that a fatal accident might have occurred in the past' as a result of aircrew taking sudden evasive action to avoid a UFO when flying fast and low. This statement was made after the author scrutinised more than one hundred unexplained fatal accident reports involving RAF aircraft during a period of 30 years. Whilst none of these contained any evidence linking them with UFOs, he did find anecdotal

evidence that some aircrew had lost their lives as a result of close encounters in the former Soviet Union.

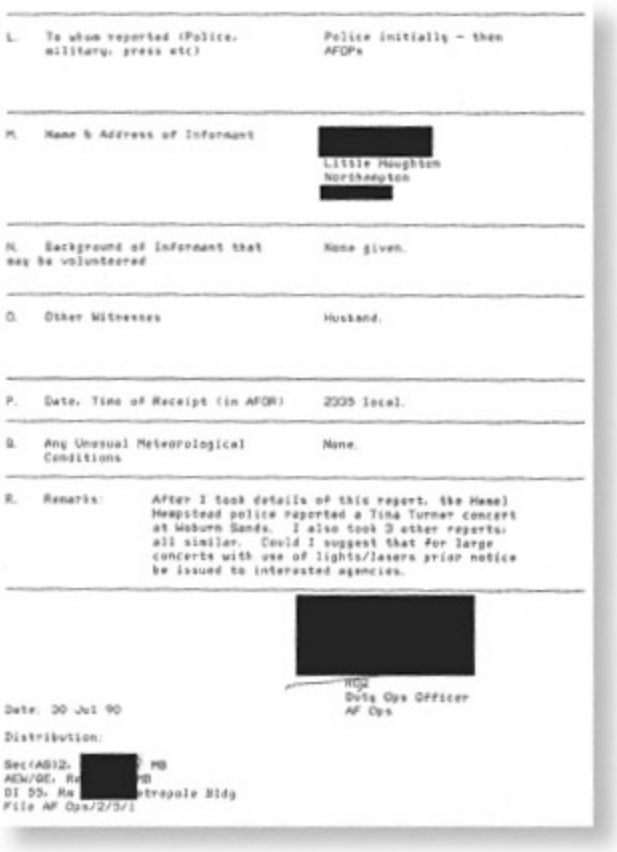
The study recommended that military aircrew should be advised that ‘no attempt should be made to out-manoeuvre a UAP during interception’. The author’s advice to civilian aircrews was: ‘although UAP appear to be benign to civil air-traffic, pilots should be advised not to manoeuvre, other than to place the object astern, if possible.’ Although the possibility of aircrew actually encountering a UFO remained very low and the level of risk from a collision was judged as being lower than a bird strike, the study decided this could not be ruled out.

(98)

ANNEX A TO
MOP 500

REPORT OF AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT

A.	Date, Time & Duration of Sighting	29 JUL 98 2300 Total. Still in progress
B.	Description of Object (No of objects, size, shape, colour, brightness)	Circles of light. Flatish. Sometimes bright. Lights similar to the ballroom lights reflected from rotating orb with mirrors.
C.	Location, indoor/outdoor, stationary/moving	LITTLE HOUGHTON. Outdoors moving - Fields below.
D.	How Observed (naked eye, binoculars, other optical device, still or movie	Naked eye.
E.	Direction on which object first seen (A landmark may be more useful than a badly estimated bearing)	Wife says south; husband says west.
F.	Angle of Sight (Estimated heights are unreliable)	45 to 90 degrees
G.	Distance (By reference to a known landmark	Cloud base - lights seems to shine through clouds.
H.	Movements (Changes in E, F & G may be of more use than estimates of course and speed)	One large and 3 small. Husband believes lights are following a pattern.
J.	Met Conditions during Observations (Moving clouds, haze, mist etc)	Few clouds, hot, breeze, good visibility. Can see stars at times.
K.	Nearby Objects (Telephone lines, high voltage lines, reservoir, lake etc or dam, swamp or marsh, river, high buildings, tall chimneys, steeples, spires, TV or radio masts, airfields, generating plant, factories, pits or other sites with floodlights or night lighting)	None. Fields only.



L.	To whom reported (Police, military, press etc)	Police initially – then AFOPs
M.	Name & Address of Informant	[redacted] Little Houghton Northampton [redacted]
N.	Background of Informant that may be volunteered	None given.
O.	Other Witnesses	Husband.
P.	Date, Time of Receipt (in AFOR)	2305 local.
Q.	Any Unusual Meteorological Conditions	None.
R.	Remarks:	After I took details of this report, the Hemel Hempstead police reported a Tina Turner concert at Woburn Sands. I also took 3 other reports; all similar. Could I suggest that for large concerts with use of lights/lasers prior notice be issued to interested agencies.

[redacted]
Duty Ops Officer
AF Ops

Date: 30 Jul 90

Distribution:

Sec(AS)2, [redacted] MB
AEW/GE, Rm [redacted] MB
DI 55, Rm [redacted] etropole Bldg
File AF Ops/2/5/1

An example of an ‘Identified Flying Object’, in this case caused by laser lights from a Tina Turner concert. DEFE 24/1939/1

THE OFFICIAL WORD: UFOS EXIST!

Although classified secret at the time it was completed, I obtained a full copy of the Condign report using the Freedom of Information Act in 2006. The study revealed that work on the UFO database began in 1997 as Tony Blair's government swept to power, ushering in an era of 'open government'. Although the MoD did not anticipate it then, the clock was ticking towards a point when they would have to find a way of making their entire back catalogue of UFO reports available to the public.

In the meantime a restricted group of senior officials received the conclusions of what was described as 'the first UK detailed and authoritative [UFO] report which has been produced since the 1950s'. The executive summary contained the following stunning admission: 'That [UFOs] exist is indisputable. Credited with the ability to hover, land, take off, accelerate to exceptional velocities and vanish, they can reportedly alter their direction of flight suddenly and clearly can exhibit aerodynamic characteristics well beyond those of any known aircraft or missile – either manned or unmanned.'[27]

This summary covered a hefty four-volume report, 465-pages in length. The 'summary of findings' led the author to conclude that although UFOs, or 'UAPs' certainly existed, they posed no threat to defence. He found no evidence among the 30 years of reports on file that UFOs 'are incursions by air objects of any intelligent (extra-terrestrial or foreign) origin'. Furthermore, 'no artefacts of unknown or unexplained origin have been reported or handed to the UK authorities, despite thousands of UAP reports.'

In addition, the report's author had found nothing about UFOs in classified signals intelligence or from information gathered by electronic eavesdropping. Apart from a few ambiguous, blurred photographs and videos there was little useful imagery showing UFOs and no reliable radiation measurements, even from supposedly evidential cases such as Rendlesham.

The Condign study did not attempt to investigate any specific sightings in depth and confined its scrutiny to individual UFO flaps that were subjected to statistical analysis using its computer database. Although flawed in its methodology, the study found many could be explained as the misidentifications of man-made aircraft, natural phenomena and 'relatively rare and not completely understood phenomena'.

It was this final category that generated the most controversial claim made by the Condign report. In the second volume of the report, the author listed more than 20 natural phenomena that have undoubtedly given rise to UFO sightings in the past. Some less familiar phenomena included new types of lightning called red sprites and blue jets that appear high above thunderclouds. These were identified and photographed only in recent years and may explain some of the UFO sightings made by aircrew. Alongside these are noctilucent clouds, auroral displays, mirages, sun dogs and other poorly understood phenomena such as 'earthquake lights', ball lightning (see p. 13) and atmospheric plasmas.

Plasma is the most common form taken by matter. Atmospheric plasmas are clusters of electrically charged particles that can take the form of gaseous clouds and beams that respond to electromagnetic fields. It follows that many unexplained atmospheric phenomena such as ball lightning and the Will-o'-the-Wisp described in Chapter 1, along with 'earthquake lights' produced by movements in the Earth's crust, are also types of plasma observed in the lower atmosphere.

The study concluded there was 'strong evidence' that a residue of unidentified sightings, particularly those reported by aircrew, were caused by these atmospheric plasmas. The report lists examples of ball lightning flying ahead or behind aircraft that resemble the 'foo-fighters' reported by aircrew during the Second World War (see pp. 16–20). On other occasions aircrew have reported lightning balls entering the fuselage of aircraft during thunderstorms.

Although witnesses often perceive UFOs as solid objects, the report's author concluded the plasma explanation was likely. But he had to admit that: 'the conditions and method of formation of the electrically-charged plasmas and the scientific rationale for sustaining them for significant periods is incomplete and not fully understood.'

Despite the lack of scientific evidence for these mysterious plasmas occurring naturally in the lower atmosphere, the author took a step further into speculative territory by applying his theory to explain 'close encounter' stories such as those described in Chapter 5. Drawing upon the UFO literature and experimental research carried out by a Canadian neuro-scientist, Dr Michael Persinger, he pondered the idea that plasmas and 'earthquake lights' might explain a range of alien abduction experiences. His report toyed with the

improbable-seeming idea that on rare occasions exposure to atmospheric plasmas may cause responses in the temporal-lobe area of the human brain, leading those affected to experience periods of 'missing time' and elaborate hallucinations that might be interpreted as supernatural experiences or contact with alien beings. This, the report's author suggested, may be 'a key factor in influencing the more extreme reports [that] are clearly believed by the victims'.

Leaving aside such far-out speculation, the Condign report's key recommendation was that UFOs had no intelligence value and that the Defence Intelligence Staff should cease to receive the reports that had, for many decades, been routinely copied to them by the MoD's UFO desk.

The report's conclusions and recommendations were circulated within the MoD during December 2000, classified as 'Secret: UK Eyes Only'. The covering letter made it clear that officials believed it was too early, at this stage, to release the results of the study to the public: 'Although we intend to carry out no further work on the subject… we hardly need remind addressees of the media interest in this subject and consequently the sensitivity of the report. Please protect this subject accordingly, and discuss the report only with those who have a need to know.'[28]

This memo and the report it covered remained secret for just over five years before it was released under the Freedom of Information Act. In 2000, when the report was completed, government files on UFOs were still being routinely withheld for up to half a century, and in other cases had been destroyed long before the arrival of open government. Today, however, Freedom of Information has opened this secret world to unprecedented scrutiny and allowed everyone access to thousands of pages of official documentation on the UFO mystery.

CHAPTER 7
Closing the UFO Files

The completion of the MoD's Condign project was a watershed moment for the British government's involvement in the UFO controversy. It brought to an end 50 years of intelligence interest in UFOs that began in 1950 when Sir Henry Tizard asked the MoD to establish a 'Flying Saucer Working Party' (see Chapter 2). Half a century passed and thousands of reports accumulated in the official files, but until 1996 no one was prepared to commit public funds to any serious study of the data. As far as the Defence Intelligence Staff were concerned, the Condign report allowed them to finally remove themselves from what they saw as their 'UFO problem'. Nevertheless, the report's conclusions remained hidden from the public until 2006 when I obtained the release of the 460-page study using the Freedom of Information Act.

As the new Millennium dawned, the MoD continued to claim they remained open-minded about the possibility that UFOs existed. But as there was no longer any formal intelligence interest in the subject, officials began looking for a way out of what they increasingly saw as a public relations headache. For the time being at least, the UFO desk continued to receive and examine UFO sighting reports for any evidence of a defence threat. So what was really going on behind the scenes? The last remaining MoD UFO files released by The National Archives in 2012 provide us with an unprecedented insight into what have become known as 'the real X-files'.

'… AS BIG AS A BATTLESHIP'

On 27 April 1998 a tabloid headline proclaimed: '24,000 mph UFO buzzes Britain.' The story, attributed to an unnamed 'senior RAF source', claimed a UFO had been tracked moving in a zig-zag pattern above the North Sea by RAF Fylingdales, the early warning station on the North York Moors. Dutch F-16 fighters were sent to investigate, but the craft disappeared from radar at fantastic speeds. 'It was definitely under control, judging by the various manoeuvres executed,' the anonymous source told the Daily Mail. 'It appeared

to be triangular and was around the size of a battleship.' He added the RAF held 'a second series of tapes, reported to show 12 UFOs changing shape in mid-flight'.

For once it appeared that solid evidence for UFO reality was within grasp. But was the story fact or fiction? When the tabloid headlines reached the Under Secretary of State for Defence, John Spellar MP, he scribbled 'What is all this about?' on the file and demanded immediate answers. The head of the MoD branch responsible for UFOs contacted the Commanding Officer at RAF Fylingdales who responded: '… the newspaper articles are pure fantasy and contain no element of truth. Over 35 years of operations at RAF Fylingdales, no UFOs have been tracked [by this station].'[1]

RAF Fylingdales said the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System – a chain of powerful radars that circles the North Atlantic – was configured only to detect and track objects in orbit around the Earth, such as satellites, decaying rockets and missiles. Anyone with a basic knowledge of the operating system should have known BMEWS was not capable of detecting flying objects at lower altitudes, as the tabloid story claimed. The officer added: '… interestingly enough, as is always the case with these reports, the military source remains unnamed, lending weight to the fact that the reports are a fabrication.'

Once again, the media had published a fantastic UFO story that confirmed what some people already believed, namely that aliens existed and were visiting Earth on a regular basis. The implication was that not only did the governments of the world know about this but were actively conspiring to hide this knowledge from the public. In fact the whole story was a fabrication, but the far less sensational truth remained hidden beneath layers of official secrecy for a further 14 years. During the Cold War, the reason for such secrecy was obvious. No responsible government would release details of the capabilities of its air defence radars as they rightly feared this information might prove useful to earthly enemies.

Today, accounts of UFOs seen from the ground and simultaneously detected by military radars are rare. In contrast, during the early part of the UFO era they were more common as radar systems were constantly developing their capacity and accuracy. Military reports reached a peak in 1956 at the time of the Suez crisis (see Chapter 3). This was a period that coincided with the tense nuclear stand-off between the Western powers and the Soviet Union. Before

the end of the Cold War, RAF aircraft were frequently scrambled to identify – and where necessary, intercept – unidentified aircraft tracked on radar approaching the British Isles. Sensational claims are frequently made by some UFOlogists who believe that since 1947 a secret war has been fought between military forces and alien intelligences. Experiences such as those recalled by USAF fighter pilot Milton Torres, who was ordered to fire upon a UFO detected above East Anglia in 1956 (see Chapter 3), are often cited as evidence for this 'Cosmic Watergate'. Enticing though the claims may be, newly released RAF documents paint a very different picture. Files opened by The National Archives in 2010 reveal that at the height of the Cold War, RAF aircraft were scrambled on average 200 times every year to investigate 'unidentified aircraft'. But according to RAF Fighter Command there remains: '… no evidence to suggest that any [interceptions] have taken place against anything other than man-made aircraft.' A confidential briefing prepared by the RAF for the UFO desk in 2000, states categorically that: '… there is no record of any air defence aircraft employed on any defence mission ever having intercepted, identified or photographed an object of extra-terrestrial nature.'[2]

The truth is that suspicious radar tracks were detected frequently but usually these were identified, on investigation, as either 'friendly' civilian aircraft that had strayed from their flight plans, or Soviet military aircraft. On other occasions, stray balloons and possibly even black project aircraft sparked UFO flaps such as the West Malling incident of 1953 (see Chapter 3). But during the Cold War, the files show the vast majority of air defence alerts were in response to the constant probing of Eastern bloc reconnaissance aircraft. Almost daily from the mid-1950s Soviet aircraft from bases in the Arctic circle approached the British Isles. Here they were spotted by radars and interceptor aircraft were scrambled to escort them out of NATO territory.

ENCLOSURE NUMBER 118

ANNEX A TO
ORDER NO 16 TO
CDC ORDERS
DATED 27 JAN 95

REPORT ON AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT

1. Date, Time and Duration of Sighting: 04 AUG 99
FM 2330 L UNTIL PRESENT (STILL THERE).

2. Description of Object (No of objects, size, shape, colour, brightness, sound, smell, etc): ONE SMALL VERY BRIGHT OBJECT.
WITH TAIL, CHANGING COLOURS

3. Exact Position when Observed (Geographical Location, Indoors or Outdoors, Stationary or Moving): INSIDE HOME ADDRESS

4. How Observed (Naked Eye, Binoculars, Still or Movie Camera/VCR):
NAKED EYE

5. Direction in which Object was First Seen (Possibly with Reference to a Landmark): N.W. TOWARDS GLENROTHES

6. Angle of Sight (Estimated Heights are Unreliable): JUST ABVE
EYE LEVEL

7. Distance (With Reference to a Landmark if Possible):
APPROX 6 MILES

8. Movements (Changes in 6, 7 & 8 may be better than Estimates of Heading and Speed): SLIGHT MOVEMENTS SIDE TO SIDE

An example of a typical MoD UFO report form from 1999, complete with a doodle of an ‘alien’, added by the RAF desk officer. DEFE 24/2008/1

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this daily ritual suddenly ended. According to a Parliamentary statement by the MoD in 1996 there had been no occasions 'when aircraft have either been scrambled or diverted from task to investigate [UFOs] picked up on radar' since 1991.[3] During this same period almost 1,200 UFO sighting reports were received by the MoD. The vast majority of these originated from ordinary members of the public. Few, if any, were corroborated by radar and just a handful were followed up in any depth. Of those that were, the momentum for action came not from the MoD itself, but as a result of external pressure often from the media, MPs and peers of the realm, such as Lord Hill-Norton, whom they regarded as a key advocate of the 'UFO lobby'. In a formerly secret memo hidden in the files, one intelligence officer dismissed these people as 'enthusiastic cranks'.[4] Others within the MoD were more open-minded. The retired intelligence officer who produced the Condign study for DI55 was convinced that real UFO phenomena existed but even he found it difficult to reconcile the large number of sightings with the 'significant absence of radar plots/tracks' in Britain's X-files.

STUMPED

There was, however, one highly evidential radar/visual UFO 'flap' lurking in the MoD's records. This complex incident would become the last to be subjected to a detailed military investigation. The drama began in the early hours of Saturday 5 October 1996 when police officers in Lincolnshire spotted strange coloured lights in the autumn sky. One of the first sightings was made by PC David Leyland from the police control room in Skegness. Shortly after 2.00 am police phoned the coastguard at Yarmouth on the Norfolk coast, reporting that officers '… can see a strange red and green rotating light in the sky southeast from Skegness. Looks to be high in the sky directly over The Wash. Many people here are observing it… looks strange as it's stationary. No [aircraft] in the area… '.[5]

Alerted by the radio chatter, police patrols in nearby Boston were on the lookout. They too could see what looked like a single bright white light stationary in the southeastern sky. Thunderstorms had been reported in the East Anglia region and, fearing an aircraft could be in trouble out at sea, the coastguard phoned the RAF's air rescue centre at Kinloss in Scotland. Kinloss had no record of any military activity in the area and had not received any

distress calls, but the incident was escalating. The number of authorities drawn in now included the police, the coastguard, RAF air-sea rescue and air traffic controllers. At around 3.00 am the coastguard received a call from the crew of a tanker, the MV Conocoast, that was taking fuel to dredgers in The Wash. Alerted by the commotion on shore, the crew of four began watching two separate sets of rotating coloured lights in the sky. The lights were red, blue, green and white and remained stationary in the sky for up to five hours until daybreak, when they faded in the dawn. Viewed through binoculars, one group appeared to be high above the horizon in the south. The second group were visible in the opposite direction, high above the North Sea.

With the lights still visible, Kinloss asked RAF Neatishead, on the Norfolk Broads, to check their defence radars for evidence of unusual activity. This was the same station from which, 40 years earlier, chief controller Freddie Wimbledon scrambled the battle flight to intercept a UFO over RAF Lakenheath (see Chapter 3). Would this new flap trigger a repeat of that dramatic incident?

RAF Neatishead produces a 24-hour real-time display of what was known in 1996 as 'the UK Air Defence Region' (UKADR). This display is constructed from electronic data collected by a patchwork of overlapping military and air traffic radars spread across the east coast of Britain. One of the stations supplying data is the air traffic control radar at Claxby, near Market Rasen in Lincolnshire, close to the UFO flap zone. Shortly after the UFO alert began, staff at London Air Traffic Control noticed an unidentified 'blip' on the Claxby radar. The same target was also visible on the air defence radar at RAF Neatishead, but air defence staff there ignored it, as their attention was focussed upon the North Sea region for approaching threats. From Claxby, the radar 'UFO' appeared to be stationary over Boston where, at the same time, police were reporting lights in the sky. Although it was not possible to calculate its height, control room staff in London knew this was not a civilian aircraft because these would normally transmit a transponder signal to ground control.

For a few hours, the impossible appeared possible. For the first time in living memory here was a UFO sighting, reported by credible witnesses (police officers), corroborated by air defence radars. This fact alone was sufficient to spark off a full-scale UFO flap. Later in the night a second airfield radar, at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire, detected an unidentified target in another position. And as the events unfolded, air traffic controllers asked the

crews of civil aircraft passing through the area to keep a lookout for anything unusual. None reported seeing any other suspicious airborne objects.

The excitement did not last long. As dawn approached it became apparent the UFOs on radar were nothing remarkable. Suspiciously, the blip over Boston had not moved for nine hours and was still visible on radar as dawn broke. The solution to the mystery was obvious to experienced air defence staff. The mysterious blip over Boston was 'a permanent echo' created not by a spaceship but by a tall building. The market town of Boston had an excellent contender: the 273 ft spire of St Botolph's church, visible for miles across the flat fenland landscape and known locally as the Boston Stump. In normal circumstances this type of echo would have been ignored, but these were not normal circumstances. The presence of the church spire on radar only became significant because of the simultaneous sightings of lights in the sky.

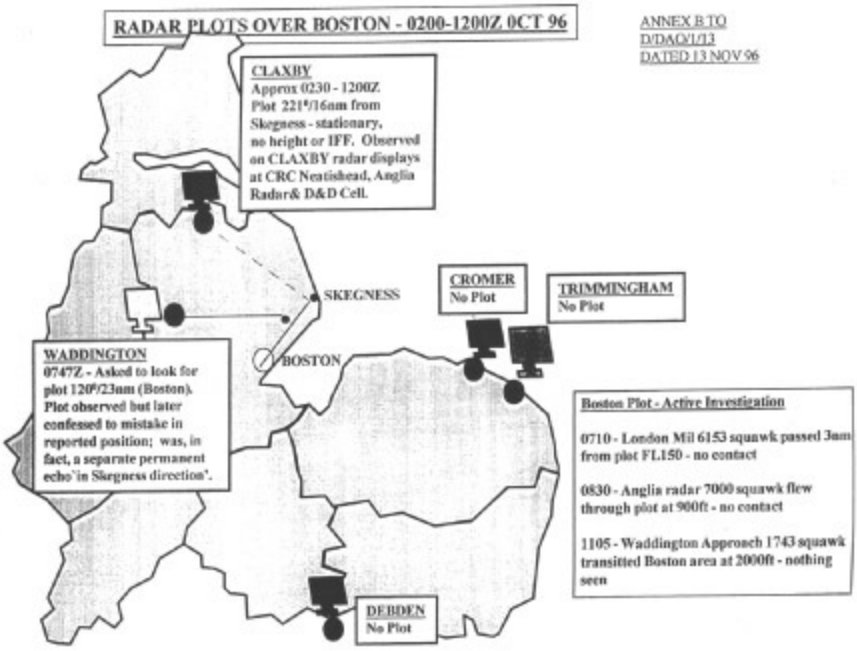
Like the magic trick that loses its mystery once the magician reveals his sleight of hand, the Lincolnshire UFO scare ended as quickly as it began. Nevertheless, few UFO incidents can ever be fully resolved even when key elements, such as radar detections, have been adequately explained. In this case, although the RAF were satisfied they had discovered the source of the radar UFOs, they remained puzzled by the lights spotted by the police and the tanker crew. They suspected some kind of natural phenomenon could have caused these, but a far more obvious culprit was identified by the police themselves. In his own testimony, one of the Skegness officers said he watched a twinkling light in the sky periodically for two hours until '… the star… was fairly high in the sky looking very similar to the rest'.

Just before daybreak, at the request of the Yarmouth coastguard, PC Leyland used his camcorder to capture footage of the light that remained visible from the third floor roof of the police control room in Skegness. This footage depicts a single, stationary white light above a block of flats. The RAF sent a copy of his video to the Royal Greenwich Observatory and asked if they could 'nail down the culprit'. Their report identified the planet Venus as the most likely source. The Queen of UFOs had fooled many sincere skywatchers in the past, including the former US President Jimmy Carter (see Chapter 5) and early in October 1996, the planet was 'exceptionally bright in the early morning sky… and stood out from all around it'.

Reviewing the contents of the RAF's file on the Lincolnshire sightings in 2007, astronomer Ian Ridpath identified the other lights in the sky that had

puzzled the RAF. The colourful flashing light seen from Skegness in the early hours was likely to have been the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, that was low on the horizon to the southeast at the time. Another bright star, Vega, could explain the lights seen in a northerly direction by the tanker crew. Ridpath suggests the crews' description of rotating, flashing coloured lights in the sky was actually caused by air currents in the atmosphere which makes stars twinkle particularly when close to the horizon.[6]

These mundane explanations came far too late to kill the excitement the UFO flap had generated. News that sightings by police officers had been 'confirmed by RAF radars' spread quickly to the local media and the UFOlogical grapevine. A partial transcript of the conversation between the coastguard, police and RAF was published by the East Anglian media and the news headlines were read by a Labour MP, Martin Redmond, who represented the Don Valley region. He had read Nick Pope's book, Open Skies, Closed Minds (see Chapter 6) and his growing fascination with UFOs prompted him to fire off a furious letter to Michael Portillo, the Defence Minister in John Major's government.


RADAR PLOTS OVER BOSTON - 0200-1200Z 0CT 96
ANNEX B TO
D/DAQ/1/13
DATED 13 NOV 96
CLAXBY
Approx 0230 - 1200Z
Plot 221°/16nm from Skegness - stationary, no height or IFF. Observed on CLAXBY radar displays at CRC Neatishead, Anglia Radar & D&D Cell.
SKEGNESS
CROMER
No Plot
TRIMMINGHAM
No Plot
BOSTON
WADDINGTON
0747Z - Asked to look for plot 120°/23nm (Boston). Plot observed but later confessed to mistake in reported position; was, in fact, a separate permanent echo 'in Skegness direction'.
Boston Plot - Active Investigation
0710 - London Mil 6153 squawk passed 3nm from plot FL150 - no contact
0830 - Anglia radar 7000 squawk flew through plot at 900ft - no contact
1105 - Waddington Approach 1743 squawk transitted Boston area at 2000ft - nothing seen
DEBDEN
No Plot

A page from the RAF Air Defence report on the Lincolnshire UFO flap, completed in November 1996. The diagram shows the positions and timings of 'radar plots' identified by air defence staff as created by a permanent echo, the Boston Stump. DEFE 24/2032/1

‘I am very concerned about an incident that occurred off the East Anglian coast recently, involving a visual unidentified flying craft sighting which was correlated by various different military radar systems,’ his letter stated. ‘What strikes me as incredible is that no aircraft were scrambled when an uncorrelated target was picked up so close to the [UK] coast… The RAF are supposed, or so I believed, to be responsible for keeping a watchful eye on activity in the UK air defence region but seem to have no idea as to what is going on.’[7]

Stung by Redmond’s criticism, for the first time since the 1960s, the MoD ordered a full investigation of a UFO incident by the RAF’s Air Defence staff. Unlike the civil servants who ran the UFO desk, Wing Commander Norman Hutchinson had an in-depth knowledge of the workings of Britain’s air defence system. ‘Most of the UFO reports that crossed my desk were easily explained but the one exception was this case,’ he explained. ‘I was told to take as long as I wanted to investigate it. I spoke to the coastguards, the dredger crew, the police and even UFO societies. It was all very “Mulder and Scully.”’[8]

Wing Commander Hutchinson’s 23-page report on ‘alleged “unidentified flying craft” sightings’ was completed on 13 November 1996. It answered Martin Redmond’s criticisms point by point and said as there was no evidence for the presence of a ‘flying craft’ at any stage in the events, there was no justification to scramble RAF Tornado interceptors. His conclusion was scathing: ‘This report is the result of almost full time, painstaking investigation over a period of eight working days and, although all the light phenomena have not been conclusively explained, research has not revealed evidence or admissions that alarming or extraordinary events were being witnessed. It is likely that similar detailed investigation into light phenomena would produce equally less than conclusive but unastonishing results.’[9]

The idea that the Boston Stump, along with assorted stars and planets, could have been responsible for the UFO scare that involved the police, coastguard and RAF was dismissed as absurd by many who saw the debunking of incidents such as this as more evidence of a government cover-up. Inevitably, some turned to conspiracy theories to account for the continuing lack of the proof they were convinced was being concealed. Others drew parallels with the Rendlesham Forest UFOs, which had also been ‘explained’ by some as a fireball, a lighthouse and bright stars (see Chapter 5). One East Anglian resident, in a letter to his local newspaper, said: ‘… It seems that “The

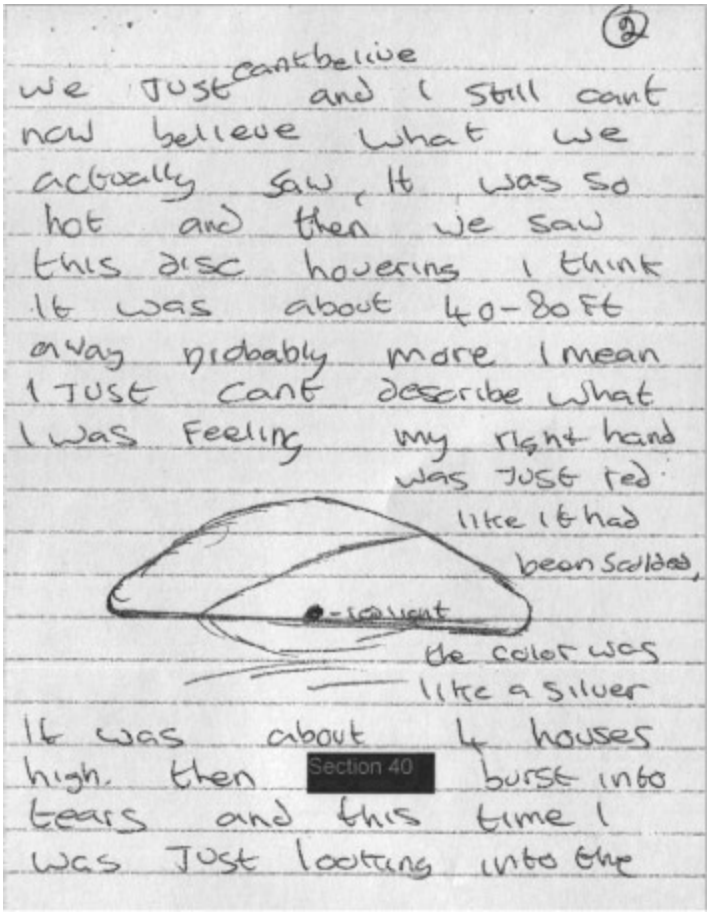
[Boston] Stump" is not on dry land after all. In fact, it is situated somewhere in the North Sea, or The Wash, or the North Norfolk coast, or at Yarmouth, or even floating in the sky miraculously above the A47 in Norfolk.'[10]

WE WANT YOU – COME WITH US!

Easily the weirdest report to emerge from the UFO files released by The National Archives in 2009 was made by two frightened young men who claimed they had narrowly escaped abduction by a UFO.

According to a report compiled by Staffordshire Police, late on the night of 4 May 1995 the youths ran into Chasetown police station in a state of excitement, calling on officers to come outside and 'see a UFO' that was visible in the sky. A police constable and sergeant went outside and saw red and white lights, but they dismissed these as aircraft landing lights. In their report, the police said both youths 'appeared upset and shocked' so they asked them to go home and write an account of their experience. They returned the next day with hand-written statements and these were forwarded to the Ministry of Defence.

In their own words, the youths said they were walking along Rugeley Road in Burntwood, shortly before 11.00 pm when they felt an 'intense burst of heat'. Their skin glowed red and both were left gasping for air as sweat poured from their bodies. Then they saw the source of the heat – a dark, silver disc-shaped object hovering about 40 ft away from them, above a farmer's field. The underside of this 'object' appeared to be glowing red. As the two youths watched in amazement, a lemon-shaped disembodied head appeared in the field, between them and the 'object'. Then a voice called out 'We want you, come with us'. On hearing this chilling invitation, both ran for their lives.


(2)
we JUST cantbelive and I still cant
now believe what we
actually saw, It was so
hot and then we saw
this disc hovering I think
It was about 40-80 Ft
away probably more I mean
I JUST cant describe what
I was Feeling my right hand
was just red
like it had
been scalded,
the color was
like a silver
It was about 4 houses
high. then Section 40 burst into
tears and this time I
was just looking into the

A page extracted from a hand-written account of an attempted 'UFO abduction' reported to Staffordshire police in 1995 and passed to the MoD's UFO desk. DEFE 24/1961/1

The aftermath of this extraordinary experience was equally strange. Evidently convinced by the youth's honesty, police officers returned with them to the scene . They pointed out the field where the UFO appeared and officers went to speak to the farmer. He revealed he was spraying his crops at the time of the 'alien encounter'. According to the police report, preserved in the MoD files, '… he did not see any persons in the field, speak to anyone or see anything unusual'.[11]

Like most UFO experiences the 'explanation' is never straightforward. I have no doubt the two young men saw something that appeared extraordinary to them at the time. But was it really a spaceship from another world, containing a sinister alien intent on abducting earthlings? Or was this UFO present only in the eye of the beholders? However sincere the youths were, their description of the UFO with its heat ray and alien voice reads like a scene from a science fiction film such as Mars Attacks! or The War of the Worlds.

A UFO with a heat ray also features in another strange story, reported to the MoD by Cheshire police 14 months later. Their account describes how a young man saw a 'very bright light' hovering near a footbridge on his route home near Widnes in the early hours of a July morning in 1996. The youth backed away, but the light appeared to follow him and he broke into a run. As he looked back, he noticed the light had moved above a cemetery. Then he heard 'a high pitched sound' that resembled wailing cats and saw 'beams of light come down from [the UFO] striking the ground'. Later, he persuaded his father to return with him to the scene where they found 'four railway sleepers smouldering with a large hole four inches in diameter burnt through one of the sleepers'. Police were called and they confirmed the railway sleeper was still smouldering five hours after the boy's experience. In their report to the MoD they described the young witness as 'a sensible sort of lad but genuine'.[12] Again, what could the MoD's UFO desk officer do with a strange report like this? Why would any potential enemy (foreign or alien) travel to Britain under cover of night simply to fire a laser beam at a cemetery in Cheshire?

The list of bizarre UFO-related experiences received by desk officer Kerry Philpott during the flap of 1996–97 includes an account from a Welsh man who suffered an unexplained illness after being struck by a beam of light from the sky. Whilst driving near Ebbw Vale on the evening of 27 January 1997 he saw 'a massive star' approaching his car from the east. Alarmed, he stopped and switched off his lights, but 'the light encircled the car, remaining for perhaps

five minutes'. With the beam now surrounding him, he emerged from his car and walked through the brilliant light, noting the total lack of sound. Frightened and alone in the darkness, he began to feel ill and noticed his car was covered in a film of dirt or dust. Even more alarming, neither his car radio or mobile phone worked until the light disappeared. The following morning he called his local RAF base to report the sighting. At that time he was still feeling unwell and he later developed a skin condition that required medical treatment.[13]

It is frustrating that the standard two-page MoD UFO report form on which this man's story was recorded tells us nothing further about this extraordinary experience. On the surface, it included physical evidence that, if collected quickly enough could have been analysed by a laboratory. Either there was a mundane explanation or there was evidence for the presence of something of potential value to science. But with a lack of enthusiasm and resources, field investigations of UFO reports by MoD personnel were by now a thing of the past and the culture of secrecy that prevailed at the Ministry of Defence continued to prevent the sharing of information on incidents of this type with anyone else. From 1997 even those reports from credible sources such as pilots and police were filed away with minimal follow-up checks. This policy was justified because of a lack of time, a dwindling defence budget and the absence of any clear evidence to suggest UFOs constituted a direct threat to the realm.

ROSWELL: THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

Early in 1997 Martin Fuller, head of Secretariat (Air Staff), the branch that acted as the 'focal point' for UFO reports reaching Whitehall, initiated a root and branch review of MoD UFO policy. This revealed how time devoted to the subject by Philpott, who had replaced Nick Pope as UFO desk officer in the summer of 1994, had increased by 50 per cent in just one year. In 1996 the department had logged 609 separate UFO sightings and responded to 343 letters from the public and 22 inquiries from Members of Parliament.[14] The figure for the number of sightings alone was the second highest on record and the review noted the MoD had logged more reports during 1996 than for all the three previous years added together.

Fuller blamed the increased workload on 'the media obsession' with UFOs that accompanied the fiftieth anniversary of the Roswell incident. 1997 saw the release of many new books, films and TV documentaries on UFOs, alien life,

crop circles and conspiracy theories. From 1994 The X-Files TV series, shown on BBC 2, was followed regularly by up to six million viewers in the UK alone. In 1996 the release of the Hollywood blockbuster Independence Day, with its themes of hostile alien invasion, giant flying saucers and references to Area 51 and Roswell increased public speculation that an imminent government disclosure of 'the truth' about alien visits to Earth was imminent.

By April that year Fuller revealed, in an MoD briefing, that his staff were struggling to answer a steady stream of letters and phone calls from members of the public 'seeking information about the existence of alien life forms, or seeking a detailed investigation/ explanation for allegations of abductions by aliens, out of body experiences, animal mutilations, crop circles etc… [and] as a consequence, staff effort [had become] increasingly diverted from core tasks.'[15] He felt some of the additional work could be directly attributed to the media activities of Nick Pope, who was now pursuing a parallel career as 'government UFO expert' whilst continuing to work in another branch of the Ministry (he eventually resigned in 2006). Pope's second book, The Uninvited, was published in the spring of 1997. The blurb described it as 'an expose of the alien abduction phenomenon'.

Earlier that year a 24-hour UFO hotline answerphone service and e-mail address was launched by the UFO desk to cope with the increasing workload. Publicly, officials said this was necessary to make it easier for people to report their sightings in a timely fashion; at face value, it appeared to suggest the government really were interested in the stories of people who saw UFOs. In secret, the UFO desk was negotiating a special arrangement to reduce its UFO workload. From April it was agreed that only reports made by 'credible witnesses' such as police, armed services or civilian aircrew, or those with photographs or video footage would be forwarded to 'specialist staff' for further checks. Reports that fell into two other categories would also be scrutinised more closely. These were sightings that were corroborated by independent witnesses and those that were detected in 'real time' by radar, which would allow interceptor aircraft to investigate.

The secret policy shake-up was a clever move because Fuller knew that reports in these three categories were few. Accounts of sightings from ordinary people were received in their hundreds. Unfortunately, these turned up in the MoD in-tray days, weeks or months after they occurred and consequently the

scent was cold. The change in policy effectively meant this type of sighting report would continue to be received, but they would be filed away with no meaningful checks or follow-ups. The files show that in reality the MoD had no interest in receiving what Fuller described as 'singleton reports from the public which tell us nothing'. But at the same time officials recognised that, because of the high level of public and Parliamentary interest, they could not be seen to completely ignore the UFO issue. Faced by vocal public critics like Lord Hill-Norton they had no choice but to continue receiving them, at least for the time being. Anything less would, according to one internal briefing released in 2011 'reveal our [true] policy and there would be a risk that would be divulged to the UFO fraternity'.[16]

THE ALDERNEY LIGHTS

One of the most impressive UFO sightings in the first decade of the new century came to light when Captain Ray Bowyer landed his Trislander passenger aircraft at the small airport on Alderney, in the Channel Islands, on the afternoon of 23 April 2007. On arrival from Southampton he immediately filed a report with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and news quickly reached the local newspaper.

Before Freedom of Information, details of this sighting could have remained secret for at least 30 years. But using the FOIA, UFOlogists were able to gain access to the MoD's file on the case within weeks. This revealed how the Trislander was approaching Alderney at 40,000 ft shortly after 2.00 pm when Bowyer spotted 'a bright light ahead which [he] thought was the reflection from the sun off glass in Guernsey'. As he scrutinised the light carefully through binoculars, Bowyer was amazed to see a 'sparkling yellow' object shaped like a long thin cigar suspended horizontally on the horizon. The object had 'very sharply defined' edges and one third from the left end was a narrow patch, dark grey in colour.[17] Bowyer's initial impression was that the object was the size of a 737 airliner or even larger. It hovered above the sea at around 4,000 ft, alarmingly just 15 miles away from his small aircraft.

Thanks to the co-operation of Jersey Airport, I obtained a tape recording of Bowyer's conversation with air traffic controller Paul Kelly. On the recording, three minutes after his initial sighting, Bowyer asks:

> 'Do you have any traffic, can't really say how far, about my 12 o'clock, level?'

Kelly replied: ‘No, no known traffic at all in your 12 o’clock.’

Bowyer responded: ‘I’ve got a very bright object… extremely bright yellow, orange object, straight ahead… Looking at it through binoculars as we speak.’

At this point Kelly says he can see ‘a very faint primary contact’ on his radar, four miles from the aircraft, but he dismissed this as a weather anomaly.

As Bowyer continued his landing approach to Alderney he spotted a second UFO, ‘exactly the same but [it] looked smaller because it was further away’. By now, passengers on the Trislander were also watching the lights through the cabin windows. A number of people who were seated immediately behind Bowyer also saw the UFOs. One of these was Kate Russell, who was travelling with her husband John four rows back. She told me: ‘At first I thought it was the sun reflecting off glass but what I was looking at was a very bright light over the sea below us.’ She added: ‘I don’t believe in little green men but this was something quite extraordinary, something we don’t have an explanation for at the present time. Ray Bowyer is a sound, rational man but he was quite shaken.’[18]

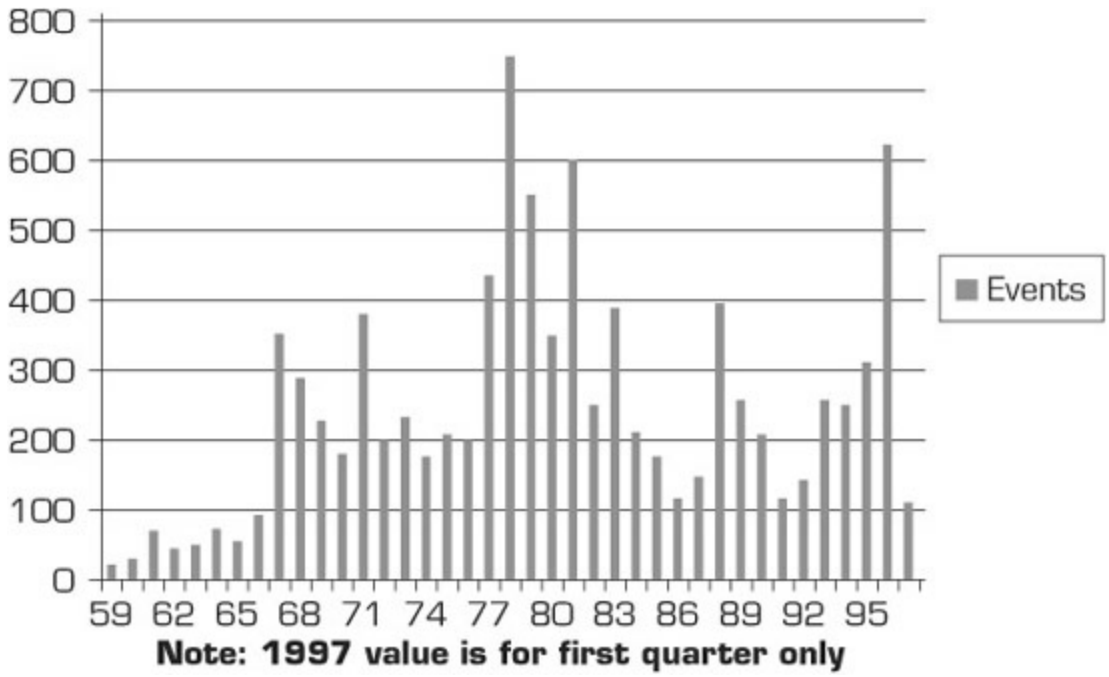
With the objects still visible, Paul Kelly put out a call to the crews of other aircraft overflying the English Channel. On radio he asked if they could see anything unusual. Immediately, the captain of a Jetstream aircraft en route to Jersey from the Isle of Man, reported he could ‘see something fitting the description, yellow/beige in colour, in my eight o’clock position, slightly to the north-west of Alderney at what I estimated to be 2,000 feet below.’ Visibility was fairly poor but the object was in sight for about one minute. Captain Patrick Patterson later told me he believed this was some kind of ‘atmospheric phenomenon’.[19]

Meanwhile, Captain Bowyer was preparing his aircraft for landing. As he descended he saw the two UFOs change their positions so they appeared to line up, one directly above the other. When he reached a layer of haze at 2,000 ft, they had vanished. In total they were visible for 12 minutes during which his sighting had been corroborated by his passengers and the captain of the Jetstream aircraft.

Despite good evidence that something unusual had been seen, the file on the case reveals the MoD decided that because the sighting occurred in French airspace the phenomena posed no threat to the UK. In other words, because it had ‘no defence significance’ they were no longer interested – even if the sighting remained unexplained. As a result, it was left to me and a group of

scientists who shared an interest in this subject to investigate further. After a year's work we were able to eliminate many of the usual explanations for UFO sightings such as sundogs, mirages, reflections and other unusual natural phenomena. Our investigations revealed that media stories describing enormous UFOs up to a mile wide, and claims that radar had confirmed the sightings were not true. With no obvious rational explanation available, we concluded this was a genuine example of an 'unidentified aerial phenomena' (UAP) and one that deserved further scientific study. But it was clear this type of study was of no interest to the Ministry of Defence or any other government body.[20]

Pilot Ray Bowyer's final word on his sighting was refreshingly open-minded: 'I can't explain it. I'm not saying it was from another world. All I'm saying is I've never seen anything like it in all my years flying.'



A graph from the DI55 Condign report illustrating the yearly frequency of UFO sighting reports logged by MoD between 1959 and 1997.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

The Channel Islands UFOs were just one of 135 sightings logged by a new MoD UFO desk officer, Paul Webb, during 2007. From the high point of media interest surrounding the Roswell anniversary in 1996–97, the numbers of reports had fallen off dramatically. By 2001 the numbers reaching the 'UFO hotline' averaged around 130 per year but none of the few referred to the RAF during the years that followed was found to have any 'defence significance'. In addition, after the events of 9/11 the intelligence services were keen to avoid any distractions caused by 'spurious reports' of unusual things seen in the sky reported by well-meaning members of the public. Although the US Department of Defence had washed its hands of its UFO problem in 1969 when it closed Project Blue Book (see Chapter 3), other Western countries, including France and the UK, continued to maintain official UFO reporting procedures for the time being.

From 2001 the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq placed enormous demands upon the UK defence budget at a time when Tony Blair's government faced a new challenge. Ministry of Defence officials had predicted that the arrival of the Freedom of Information Act in 2005 would immediately be followed by a corresponding increase in requests for access to its UFO files. By the turn of the millennium a large number of the earlier files, including those containing Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous memo (see Chapter 2) had been transferred to the Public Record Office (now The National Archives) under the existing 30-year rule, but more recent records remained firmly in closed MoD archives (see Chapter 5). Under the old Public Records Act they would have remained locked away until the middle of the twenty-first century.

But pressure for full disclosure continued to grow and in 2000 I launched my own campaign to persuade the Ministry of Defence that opening their files to the public was their only realistic option. In that year Welsh UFOlogist Colin Ridyard used the Code of Practice for Access to Government Information to apply for copies of UFO reports filed by air traffic controllers and aircrew during the previous two years. Initially, the MoD rejected his request on the grounds that the task 'would require unreasonable diversion of resources.' Undeterred, and with help from his MP, Ridyard took the case to the Parliamentary Ombudsman, whose intervention led the MoD to release the information as a 'one-off exercise'. In his judgement, Ombdusman Michael

Buckley welcomed the MoD's openness but accepted that the Code 'recognises there are limits to the resources that a body can reasonably devote to answering requests'.[21]

Meanwhile Lord Hill-Norton was pressing the MoD in parliament for the release of its closed UFO files ahead of the standard 30 years. Again in 1999 officials turned down this request, arguing that the cost of removing personal information from the files would be too expensive to justify the work involved.[22] But they knew this argument would not survive the implementation of the Freedom of Information Act. All central government departments were preparing to implement FOI by January 2005 and a visitor from the US Department of Defense warned MoD officials to expect a 'full postbag' on UFOs for many years to come. True to his word, in the first six months following the arrival of the FOIA, the ministry received 200 applications for information on UFOs which had become one of its three most popular subjects for requests.

In May 2006 a FOI request I made to the Defence Intelligence Staff in the previous year led to the declassification of the Condign project report and its release to the public. Soon afterwards (at my request) DI55 agreed to review all their surviving UFO files for release. By this point the momentum had built into a full-scale campaign for disclosure. On 27 February 2007 an intelligence officer emailed a colleague to say 'that this campaign is being led by one man and the cumulative resource implications of what he has been asking for has been considerable'. He admitted: '… we cannot sustain the current level of FOI requests [and] I wonder whether we have come to the stage when we need to take a fresh look at the matter and say enough is enough.' The email went on to suggest that DIS should: 'consider (in connection with [the UFO desk]) wholesale release of papers on the subject.'[23]

By September 2006 the ministry had decided enough was enough. During that month the Secretary State for Defence, Des Browne, approved a proposal from the Directorate of Air Staff (as the former Sec(AS) was now called) to transfer the remaining UFO files to The National Archives. Funds were found to scan approximately 160 files and remove sensitive personal information, such as the names and addresses of those who had reported sightings to the authorities. This was described as 'the largest release of documents younger than 30 years in the MoD's entire history'.

Browne was told that: '… since the end of World War Two, MoD has been

tasked with recording and, from time to time, investigating UFO sightings. Contrary to what many members of the public may believe, MoD has no interest in the subject of extra-terrestrial life forms visiting the UK, only ensuring the integrity and security of UK airspace.' The minister was told most of the surviving files were held by the department that ran the UFO desk, but a few surviving intelligence files were also included in the proposed release. The earliest dated from the late 1970s and all were 'of low security classification'. Their contents did, however: 'include references to air defence matters, defence technology, relations with foreign powers and occasional uncomplimentary comments by staff or police officers about members of the public, which will need to be withheld… but there is no reason, in principle, why they cannot be released.' The briefing ended with these words: 'The MoD is aware of no clear evidence to prove or disprove the existence of aliens and consequently the files are considerably less exciting than the 'industry' surrounding the UFO phenomena would like to believe.'[24]

By slowly extricating themselves from public association with the UFO phenomenon the MoD were consigning the subject to history, much as the US Air Force had done when they deposited the Project Blue Book files at the US National Archives three decades earlier. The British MoD realised their long-term plan would take some time to implement, but reading between the lines it was clear to me that the decision to release all the remaining files was the beginning of the end.

Their Last Word on UFOs

From the earliest days, establishment figures, including politicians, scientists and celebrities have defied the disapproval of their peers to express their opinions on the existence, or otherwise, of UFOs.

One of the first to publicly commit himself was Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding (1882–1970), the RAF mastermind credited with victory in the Battle of Britain. Dowding was also a spiritualist who believed he had received messages in the séance room from airmen killed in action. He saw flying saucers and the claims of George Adamski as entirely consistent with the teachings of the theosophists; he announced his conversion to believer in the spiritualist newspaper The Two Worlds during May 1954. Dowding said: 'I believe that the occupants come from outer space… but I do not know why they

persist in buzzing about in our atmosphere and make so little attempt to contact the many people who would receive them properly.'[1]

Others in military and government circles were less easily convinced. Wartime Prime Minister Winston Churchill's famous memo on 'flying saucers' to his Air Minister in 1952 is often quoted (see Chapter 2). But less well known is an anecdote from 1954 when artist Bernard Hailstone was painting Churchill's portrait in the grounds of his Westerham home. When the subject turned to space travel and UFOs, the Prime Minister's response was: 'I think that we should treat other planets with the contempt they deserve.'[2]

A 1947 speech by wartime Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, Churchill's successor as Prime Minister, warned that 'it seems to be an unfortunate fact that the nations of the world were only really united when they were facing a common menace'. Post-war, he felt the superpowers could only be brought together 'when they find someone in Mars to get mad against'. His speech provided the inspiration for a novel by former spy Bernard Newman, The Flying Saucer, published in 1948. The plot revolved around the faked crash of alien spacecraft in various parts of the world, including the New Mexico desert, organised by scientists working to prevent a Third World War.[3]

The theme of an alien threat forcing world leaders to work together continued to resonate with politicians during the Cold War. In 1985 US President Ronald Reagan startled his aides at a meeting with Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in Geneva by suggesting the two superpowers would cooperate if the Earth was ever threatened with alien invasion. According to his biographer Lou Cannon, Reagan's advisers were frequently embarrassed whenever the president raised what became known as his 'little green men' obsession. Gen Colin Powell was convinced that his proposal to the Soviet leader had been inspired by the 1951 science-fiction film, The Day the Earth Stood Still.[4] In 1982, following a special screening of the movie E. T. at the White House, the former actor famously turned to director Steven Spielberg and joked, 'we really enjoyed your movie… and there are a number of people in this room who know that everything on that screen is absolutely true'.

Reagan's fascination with UFOs was shared with an unlikely Cold War adversary, KGB chief Yuri Andropov, who was Soviet leader 15 months from late 1982. The memoirs of his former Politburo aide Igor Sinitsin revealed that Andropov set up two committees to investigate the phenomenon in 1977 and issued orders that all military personnel were to file detailed reports on

sightings over Russian territory.[5]

The MoD files contain hundreds of letters addressed to politicians requesting confirmation of every conceivable UFO and conspiracy rumour. Believers in UFOs petitioned each new Prime Minister with requests to open files, launch investigations or confirm that aliens really had landed on Earth. In 1997 one 'persistent correspondent' asked Labour leader Tony Blair if he could verify that films and TV shows like The X-Files and Independence Day were part of 'a strategy by Western governments to prepare the population for the admission that there has indeed been contact from aliens, extraterrestrials, trans-dimensionals and/or time travellers'.[6] All such letters were passed to the Ministry of Defence who responded with the standard 'no defence significance' line that simply confirmed the writers' belief that a cover-up was underway.

Whilst on the campaign trail in January 2009, David Cameron was asked to comment on pro-UFO comments made by Apollo astronaut Ed Mitchell (see Afterword). Cameron's response was: 'I'm convinced we have been visited by alien lifeforms – and one of them is the Trade Secretary, Peter Mandelson.' Less flippant was Margaret Thatcher's comment, when quizzed by author Georgina Bruni about UFOs and alien technology at a cocktail party in May 1997. Her response: 'UFOs? You must get your facts right, and you can't tell the people' was interpreted by Bruni to mean Baroness Thatcher was not only aware of the phenomenon but regarded aliens as a potential threat to national security. You Can't Tell the People became the title of her book on the Rendlesham Forest mystery, published in 2000. But the former Prime Minister's personal assistant, Mary Wakeley, has insisted that the comment 'you must get your facts right' was one 'that Lady Thatcher regularly uses in almost all circumstances [and] I do not think one should read too much into it – as the author obviously has done'.[7]

Perhaps Baroness Thatcher really had been briefed on the subject by her scientific advisers, as we know Churchill and other senior figures, such as Admiral of the Fleet, Earl Mountbatten, had been in the past. If that was the case, the briefing was unlikely to have confirmed the existence of a UFO threat to the realm. Early in the flying saucer age, Mountbatten was a committed believer who encouraged friends in the media to publish UFO stories (see Chapter 2). Adverse publicity obliged him to keep his views private during his term as Chief of Defence Staff (1959–65), but in 1962 he privately sought the

counsel of his friend, the MoD's chief scientific adviser, Lord Solly Zuckerman. His response compared the evidence for UFOs with that for ghosts and the Loch Ness Monster, a phenomenon that he described as 'a submarine saucer'. In a personal note, Zuckerman said that despite the fact that all the resources of modern science had failed to produce evidence of the monster's existence, 'those people who wish to go on believing will be able to do so on no more solid a foundation than disbelief in modern methods of observation. So it is with flying saucers.' Soon afterwards, Mountbatten told a correspondent he had 'gradually lost interest' in the subject since his briefing from the Chief Scientist.[8]

Zuckerman's views echoed those of his contemporaries in the scientific staffs of the British government. Wartime chief scientist Lord Cherwell famously dismissed flying saucers as 'an American psychosis', whilst his protégé, wartime intelligence expert R. V. Jones was more nuanced but no less sceptical. In a reflective paper written during the UFO flap of 1967, he wrote: 'In coming to a conclusion about the existence of flying saucers, there is a strong temptation to be overcautious, because if you turn out to be wrong in denying their existence the error will be blazoned in the history of science; but if you merely turn out to be right, there will be little credit in proving a negative case.'[9]

Jones's scepticism was shared by the German-born rocket scientist Wernher von Braun, who was the chief architect of the Saturn V rocket that took Apollo astronauts to the moon. Responding to questions on UFOs in his 1958 book First Men to the Moon, Von Braun said his experience testing guided missiles led him to be highly sceptical about 'any sighting report of a fleeting, mysterious object in the sky'. Addressing those 'who, either through personal observation or through hearsay based on other people's accounts, still insist that objects of extra-terrestrial origin are roaming through our atmosphere, I can only say that I have never seen such an object and cannot believe in their existence until I do.'[10]

Astronomers and cosmologists tend to share von Braun's views. During the 1960s, when he was a student in the Department of Physics, University of London, Paul Davies wrote to R. V. Jones challenging his sceptical attitude towards the 'evidence for UFOs'.[11] Today Professor Davies is an internationally acclaimed cosmologist and astrobiologist who, as chair of SETI's Post-Detection Task Group, would become Earth's ambassador if

contact was ever made with an extraterrestrial civilisation in the future. Davies says he is one of the few scientists who has actually examined the UFO evidence assembled in the University of Colorado report that was based on Project Blue Book's files. Significantly, his views have changed radically since his days as a young UFOlogist 40 years ago. In a 2008 interview he said: 'Obviously people see things in the sky all the time and the vast majority are just misperceptions or atmospheric phenomena of various sorts… then there's the tougher residue that's harder to explain and I would say two things about those. One is that these are real experience – I don't think anyone is lying. The second thing is that to me, they don't have the hallmark of extraterrestrial visitation and it is not what I would expect from ET. So whatever lies behind this, and there may be different explanations for different things, I don't think extraterrestrial visitation will be one of them.'[12]

INVASION OF THE ORANGE ALIENS

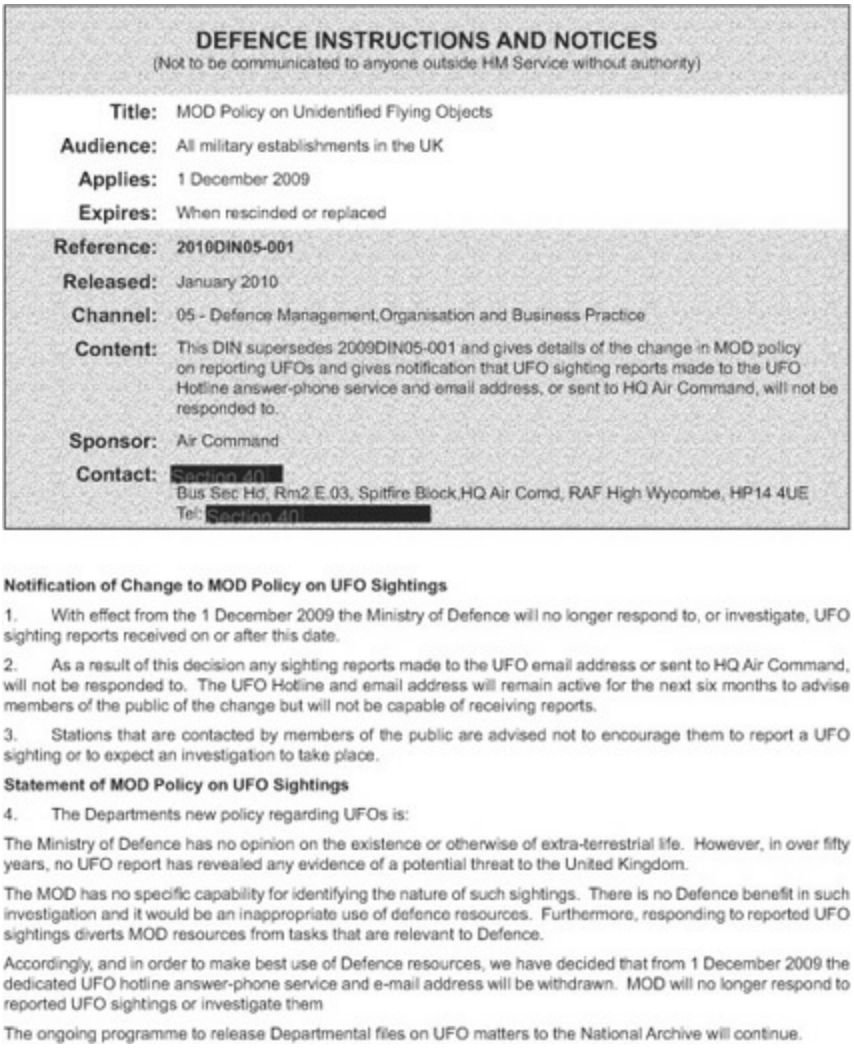
The release by The National Archives of the first tranch of UFO files during May 2008 was accompanied by a new wave of sightings across the British Isles. In June The Sun newspaper reported how the crew of a police helicopter had a near-miss with a UFO as they returned to their base at St Athan near Cardiff. Later that month the newspaper devoted its front page to a story headlined 'Army Spot UFOs over Shropshire'. This told how three soldiers from the 1st Battalion Irish Regiment observed a fleet of 13 lights in the sky moving above Tern Hill barracks near Market Drayton at 11.00 pm on 7 June. One of the soldiers, Cpl Mark Proctor, told the paper: 'They were zig-zagging, but I filmed two [on my mobile phone] before they disappeared. They were like rotating cubes with multiple colours… The other lads were as amazed by it as I was.'

The Sun quoted 'UFO expert' Nick Pope calling for an inquiry into the new sightings by the MoD and Civil Aviation Authority. He said: 'They need to interview witnesses, analyse the film and check both civil and military radar to see if any unusual activity was logged.' Pope argued this was important because 'this was a military base and the military tend to make good witnesses'.[25] By 2008 the MoD's UFO desk had moved from Whitehall to High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire where it now formed part of the RAF's Air Command. After the flurry of press interest in the Tern Hill sighting, UFO desk

officer Paul Webb promptly obtained a copy of Cpl Proctor's footage from Army HQ and, after viewing it, reported back to his superiors: 'It shows a number of lights in the sky. As reported in the [press], the lights change colour and appear square, but this looks like the pixels showing up as the photographer zoomed in. They do not appear to be moving quickly.' Webb's report said a MoD inquiry of the kind suggested by Nick Pope was not needed because the BBC had discovered that at the same time as the soldier's sightings, a local hotel had launched a number of Chinese lanterns. He concluded: 'I do not intend to investigate any further as I think we have our answer.'[26]

The Tern Hill sighting was taken more seriously than others received by the MoD in 2008 because, as Nick Pope said, members of the armed forces are, like police officers, often regarded as 'credible witnesses'. Common sense suggests that soldiers would be able, for example, to distinguish a flying saucer (or enemy aircraft) from a Chinese lantern. Yet according to Webb's report the UFOs filmed by Cpl Proctor appeared to be merely tiny hot air balloons and we know that lanterns of this kind were released by a hotel in the same area at the relevant time. This example illustrates the uncomfortable fact that there is no such thing as a trained observer when it comes to identifying unfamiliar phenomena in the night sky, no matter how 'credible' they might be in their own field of expertise.

By 2008 so many Chinese lanterns were being reported as UFOs that the numbers of sightings logged by the MoD doubled in the space of one year. In 2009 the upsurge was so dramatic that by November a record-breaking 634 sightings had poured in. Hundreds, if not thousands, of puzzled skywatchers across the British Isles and in parts of Europe watched small orange rotating lights moving in loose formations across the night sky. Those unfamiliar with the appearance of Chinese lanterns reported being startled and transfixed by what they had seen. Some became convinced the lights were being intelligently manoeuvred, or were aware of the presence of the observer. And however mundane the explanations for these sightings actually were, those who saw the lanterns were reporting a real UFO experience because at the time they were unable to identify what they saw. Meanwhile tabloid newspapers continued to push the idea these lights in the sky were 'alien fleets' rather than tiny hot air balloons.



DEFENCE INSTRUCTIONS AND NOTICES

(Not to be communicated to anyone outside HM Service without authority)

Title:	MOD Policy on Unidentified Flying Objects
Audience:	All military establishments in the UK
Applies:	1 December 2009
Expires:	When rescinded or replaced
Reference:	**2010DIN05-001**
Released:	January 2010
Channel:	05 - Defence Management,Organisation and Business Practice
Content:	This DIN supersedes 2009DIN05-001 and gives details of the change in MOD policy on reporting UFOs and gives notification that UFO sighting reports made to the UFO Hotline answer-phone service and email address, or sent to HQ Air Command, will not be responded to.
Sponsor:	Air Command
Contact:	Section 40 Bus Sec Hd, Rm2.E.03, Spitfire Block,HQ Air Comd, RAF High Wycombe, HP14 4UE Tel: Section 40

Notification of Change to MOD Policy on UFO Sightings

1. With effect from the 1 December 2009 the Ministry of Defence will no longer respond to, or investigate, UFO sighting reports received on or after this date.

2. As a result of this decision any sighting reports made to the UFO email address or sent to HQ Air Command, will not be responded to. The UFO Hotline and email address will remain active for the next six months to advise members of the public of the change but will not be capable of receiving reports.

3. Stations that are contacted by members of the public are advised not to encourage them to report a UFO sighting or to expect an investigation to take place.

Statement of MOD Policy on UFO Sightings

4. The Departments new policy regarding UFOs is:

The Ministry of Defence has no opinion on the existence or otherwise of extra-terrestrial life. However, in over fifty years, no UFO report has revealed any evidence of a potential threat to the United Kingdom.

The MOD has no specific capability for identifying the nature of such sightings. There is no Defence benefit in such investigation and it would be an inappropriate use of defence resources. Furthermore, responding to reported UFO sightings diverts MOD resources from tasks that are relevant to Defence.

Accordingly, and in order to make best use of Defence resources, we have decided that from 1 December 2009 the dedicated UFO hotline answer-phone service and e-mail address will be withdrawn. MOD will no longer respond to reported UFO sightings or investigate them

The ongoing programme to release Departmental files on UFO matters to the National Archive will continue.

The Ministry of Defence notice issued to all RAF units in December 2009. This announced the closure of the UFO desk and the termination of all further interest in UFO reports.

Small paper lanterns were first used in third-century China as military signals, but more recently people have released them to celebrate special occasions such as weddings. The craze spread to Britain in 2002, when they were released as a tribute to the 182 people killed in the Bali bombings. In June the following year they made an appearance at Glastonbury when festival-goers reported seeing mysterious lights moving 300 ft above the Pyramid Stage during a performance by rock group Radiohead. By 2006 the MoD's files were bulging with accounts of lanterns reported as UFOs. For example, in the summer of 2006 a report from Herne Bay, Kent, described eight yellow/orange spheres 'that looked like they had flames coming out of the back of them'. Another account from a man in London described formations of orange 'fireballs' in the night sky. He said they were 'an amazing sight'.[27] Many similar accounts, often accompanied by grainy footage captured on mobile phones, entertained readers of tabloid newspapers. During 2009 dozens more reached the UFO desk officer at the MoD.

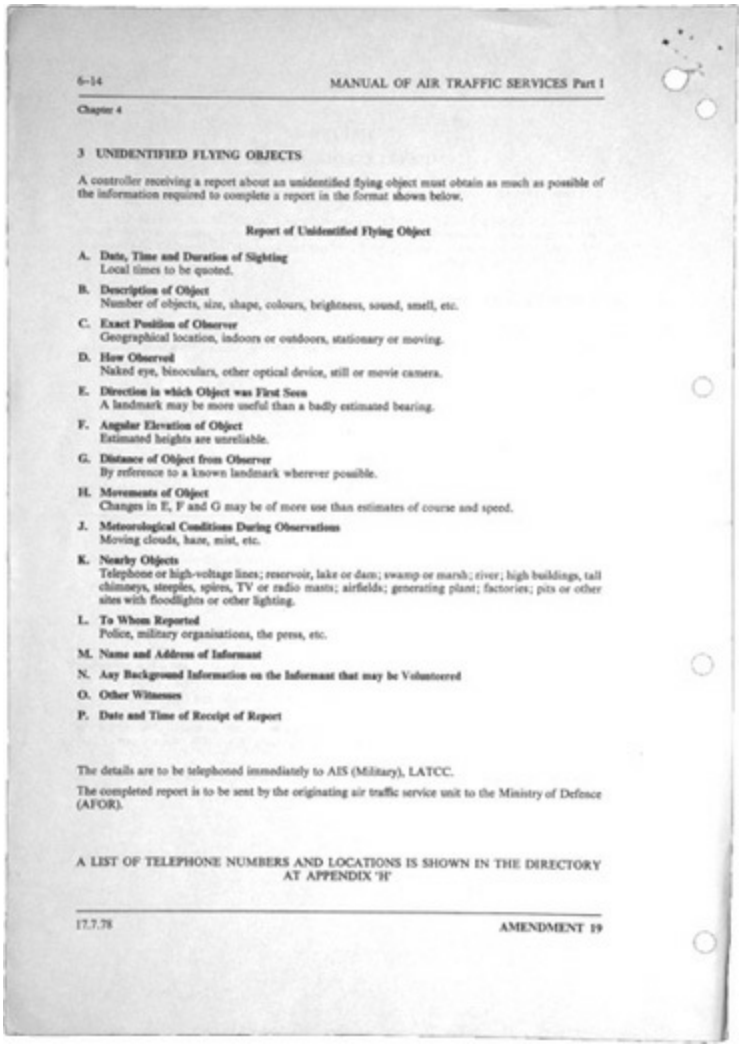
By then Gordon Brown's Labour government was struggling to deal with the fallout from the worst economic crisis since the 1930s. The recession that followed led to severe cutbacks in public spending. The MoD was not immune and, committed to a long and expensive ground war in Afghanistan, the UFO task figured very low on the list of its core priorities. The end came on 11 November when Defence Minister Bob Ainsworth was briefed by Carl Mantell of the RAF's Air Command on the outcome of a final review of their UFO policy. Mantell recommended that '… we should seek to reduce very significantly the UFO task which is consuming increasing resource, but produces no valuable defence output'. Ainsworth was told that 'in more than fifty years no UFO sighting reported to [MoD] has indicated the existence of any military threat to the UK' and furthermore 'there is no defence benefit in [MoD] recording, collating, analysing or investigating UFO sightings'.[28]

Even so, the files reveal officials were so worried about accusations of cover-up they had deliberately avoided making any 'formal approaches to other Governments' in reaching their decision. This was because these 'would become public when the relevant UFO files are released and would be viewed by "ufologists" as evidence of international collaboration and conspiracy'. The MoD could not, however, deny that it was following the lead taken by the US government following the closure of Project Blue Book in 1969. The MoD was also mindful of the fact that early in 2007 the French Space Agency's UFO unit

had published its files on a public website. The defence forces of other countries, including Denmark, New Zealand and Brazil, would soon follow this example.

In December 2009, one month after Carl Mantell's report was delivered, Ainsworth approved the closure of the MoD's UFO hotline answerphone service and the email address that was set up on the anniversary of the Roswell incident, 12 years earlier. The hotline, MoD decided: 'serves no defence purpose and merely encourages the generation of correspondence of no defence value.' The MoD predicted the closure: 'will attract negative comment from "ufologists" [who] may, individually or as a group, mount a vociferous, but short-lived campaign to reinstate the UFO Hotline suggesting that, by not investigating UFOs, MoD is failing its Defence commitment.'

During the same month the last UFO desk officer, Paul Webb, was moved to another post and the remaining departmental files were added to the list for release by The National Archives. The closure of the desk was the end of an era that had begun in the mid-1950s when the Air Ministry agreed to take on responsibility for answering public and Parliamentary questions on UFOs (see Chapter 3). Almost fifty years later, Carl Mantell said MoD had decided that: 'investigations into UFO sightings, even from more reliable sources, serve no useful purpose and merely divert air defence specialists from their primary tasks. Accordingly, no further investigations should be carried out into UFO reports received from any source.'[29]



3 UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECTS

A controller receiving a report about an unidentified flying object must obtain as much as possible of the information required to complete a report in the format shown below.

Report of Unidentified Flying Object

A. **Date, Time and Duration of Sighting**
Local times to be quoted.

B. **Description of Object**
Number of objects, size, shape, colours, brightness, sound, smell, etc.

C. **Exact Position of Observer**
Geographical location, indoors or outdoors, stationary or moving.

D. **How Observed**
Naked eye, binoculars, other optical device, still or movie camera.

E. **Direction in which Object was First Seen**
A landmark may be more useful than a badly estimated bearing.

F. **Angular Elevation of Object**
Estimated heights are unreliable.

G. **Distance of Object from Observer**
By reference to a known landmark wherever possible.

H. **Movements of Object**
Changes in E, F and G may be of more use than estimates of course and speed.

J. **Meteorological Conditions During Observations**
Moving clouds, haze, mist, etc.

K. **Nearby Objects**
Telephone or high-voltage lines; reservoir, lake or dam; swamp or marsh; river; high buildings, tall chimneys, steeples, spires, TV or radio masts; airfields; generating plant; factories; pits or other sites with floodlights or other lighting.

L. **To Whom Reported**
Police, military organisations, the press, etc.

M. **Name and Address of Informant**

N. **Any Background Information on the Informant that may be Volunteered**

O. **Other Witnesses**

P. **Date and Time of Receipt of Report**

The details are to be telephoned immediately to AIS (Military), LATCC.

The completed report is to be sent by the originating air traffic service unit to the Ministry of Defence (AFOR).

A LIST OF TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND LOCATIONS IS SHOWN IN THE DIRECTORY AT APPENDIX 'H'

A page from the 1979 edition of the Civil Aviation Authority manual for air traffic controllers, setting out procedure for the reporting of UFO incidents by pilots and ATC staff. DEFE 24/1552

In January 2010 the RAF asked the Home Office to cancel standing instructions to police forces who had, in the past, routinely forwarded UFO sightings reported by officers and members of the public to the MoD. Another letter was sent to the Head of the Aviation Directorate, requesting that 'any reports received by the Department of Transport or air control centres are not forwarded to MoD and that members of the public who make such reports are not encouraged to believe an investigation will take place'. Despite the finality of this decision, in March that year members of the Civil Aviation Authority decided there was 'still a requirement for controllers either observing a UFO or receiving a report from aircrew to consider if the sighting has any flight safety value'.[30]

FROM OUT OF THE BLUE

So was this really the end of official interest in UFOs? Have Britain's X-files really been closed?

The answer to this vexed question has to be a qualified 'no'. Buried in the MoD's final statement was an admission that British skies would not be left undefended against potential future airborne threats. For all practical purposes, the closure of the UFO desk made no difference to the unceasing, round-the-clock radar watch that has existed since before the days of the Battle of Britain. The most significant change was that, after years of deliberation, both the MoD and the CAA had publicly admitted they had no further interest in receiving UFO reports from members of the public, no matter how 'credible' these might be.

The reasons for the decision were simple from the military point of view. Future threats, they believe, will come from earthly enemies and our first line of defence would not be the eyes and ears of the public, but the protective curtain provided by the UK's tried and tested air defence system that is primarily dependent upon the radar shield. Throughout the Cold War the British government remained sceptical about UFOs, but felt they could not be ignored as there remained a small risk that at least some could be enemy aircraft or even missiles. As that danger ebbed away with the collapse of the Soviet empire, new ones emerged in the aftermath of the events of 9 September 2001. The use by Al Qaeda terrorists of hijacked aircraft to launch devastating attacks on New York and Washington highlighted the real and present threat

posed by ‘unidentified aircraft’ that were, for all intents and purposes, UFOs until the point of identification. But the problem facing Western governments post-9/11 is more complex than the Cold War threat of mutually assured destruction that provided the backdrop for the post-Second World War UFO flaps. Today, sophisticated early warning radar systems can detect objects the size of a pencil in orbit around the Earth. They can be relied upon to detect missiles and conventional military aircraft, but since 2001 they have been unable to provide advanced warning of hijacked aircraft piloted by fanatics who are not afraid to die to complete their missions.

Even during the Cold War the defensive shield was far from infallible. For example, in October 1960 a formation of UFOs was detected by the new Ballistic Missile Warning system at Thule in Greenland. The objects appeared to be heading directly towards North America from the direction of the Soviet Union. Within seconds Strategic Air Command HQ in Omaha, Nebraska, scrambled the crews of B52 bombers armed with nuclear warheads to prepare a retaliatory strike again the Eastern Bloc. But at the last moment checks revealed the ‘missiles’ were spurious echoes on the radar. Unusual atmospheric conditions had created phantoms on the BMEWS that could not be seen by other radars. A Third World War was narrowly averted. After the Thule incident Labour MPs asked the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, how close the West came to war and how easy it was for the system to be fooled. In Parliament, the Prime Minister assured them that he was satisfied ‘that our precautions are amply sufficient to prevent nuclear war starting as a result of an accident on the part of the West’ and said the arrangements for ‘co-operation and co-ordination of radar warning systems between ourselves and the United States are excellent’.[31]

But the risk remains that the unexpected appearance of ‘UFOs’– whatever their source – could trigger off an apocalyptic international confrontation. In 1980 the US National Security Agency (NSA), released a number of classified UFO-related documents following a lawsuit by a UFO pressure group. Among them was a undated seven page draft of a monograph titled ‘UFOs and the Intelligence Community Blind Spot to Surprise or Deceptive Data.’ This document highlighted what the author considered to be ‘a serious shortcoming’ in the eavesdropping agency’s communications intelligence (COMINT) interception and reporting procedures. This was: ‘the inability to respond correctly to surprising information or deliberately deceptive data’ such as the appearance of UFOs. The author recommended that ‘the weakness ought to be

remedied and quickly if the United States is to be able to respond swiftly and appropriately to surprise attack.'[32]

We do not know how seriously the NSA and its British equivalent, GCHQ, have treated UFOs. The material released by the super-secret NSA provides few clues and GCHQ, along with British's security and intelligence services, are exempt from the Freedom of Information Act. However, on at least two occasions since 9/11 unidentified objects have triggered security alerts on the US mainland. In April 2005 the US President George W. Bush was bundled from his office to an underground bunker and Vice President Dick Cheney was driven to an 'undisclosed location' near the White House after an 'unidentified aircraft' was tracked on radar approaching Washington DC. Black Hawk aircraft were scrambled, armed secret service agents surrounded the White House and anti-aircraft batteries were raised to the 'fire' position. The scare began when an unusual target was detected on radar 20 miles (32 km) inside restricted airspace south of Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. The blip vanished and then reappeared several minutes later just seven miles (11 km) from the airport, moving around the speed of a helicopter. But interceptor crews sent to the area could see nothing except clouds. On this occasion these UFOs were identified as 'a weather anomaly' created by unusual atmospheric conditions similar to those that triggered the Washington DC UFO flap of 1952 (see Chapter 2). A similar scare happened in November 2003 when F-16 fighters were scrambled to intercept a blip, thought to be a plane, that had entered restricted airspace around the White House. Following this false alarm, Federal Aviation spokesman William Shuman was reported to have said: 'It's one of those electronic gremlins that pop up, but there was no aircraft there.' Subsequently the North Atlantic Aerospace Command (NORAD) revealed it had responded to 1,600 similar 'false alarms' across the USA since 9/11. On this occasion it could not explain what caused the alarm, but aircraft were scrambled as a 'precaution'.[33]

No information has emerged so far to suggest similar UFO scares have occurred in Britain since 9/11, but in March 2010 the MoD admitted that RAF jets had been scrambled twice in response to terrorist alerts on passenger aircraft. Both turned out to be false alarms. On all these occasions decisions on action were taken 'at the highest levels of government', by the Prime Minister or his deputy.[34] The historian Peter Hennessy noticed there is 'a chilling symmetry' between the 9/11 attacks and Cold War fears that an enemy could

evade Britain's air defences to launch a devastating attack on London, either by sea or from the air.[35] In 1950 as the Flying Saucer Working Party held their first meeting, members of another secret government cabal – hidden by the obscure title of the Imports Research Committee – gathered elsewhere at Whitehall. Both were concerned about the threat posed by unidentified flying objects. One decided flying saucers piloted by aliens was a threat the MoD really did not need to lose any sleep over. But down the corridor, the IRC were convinced the Soviet Union had the capability to launch a suicide attack on London using a low-flying civilian aircraft to deliver an atomic bomb. The committee concluded that: 'short of firing on every strange civil aircraft that appears over our shores we know of no way of preventing an aircraft that sets out on such a mission from succeeding.'[36]

Today there can be no doubt that UFOs – whatever their source and intentions – will remain a real and present danger to the governments and military forces of the world.

Afterword

In this book I have selected the most impressive UFO stories from the British Ministry of Defence's files on UFOs and examined the results of the occasional government investigations during the twentieth century. After more than 60 years of sightings – more than 100 if you factor in the phantom zeppelins and foo-fighters of the First and Second World Wars – what conclusions can be reached about this puzzling and persistent mystery?

In 1968 Professor R. V. Jones concluded that, if pushed to give his opinion one way or the other on the existence of UFOs, he would have based his decision on the assumption that they were either straight fantasy or the incorrect identification of a 'rare and unrecognised phenomenon'.[1] Just over a decade later, Lord Strabolgi expressed a similar point of view during the House of Lords UFO debate, stating: 'there really are many strange phenomena in the sky, and these are invariably reported by reliable people, [but] there is a wide range of natural explanations to account for such phenomena'.[2]

As the many stories collected for this book have shown, it seems likely that a rational explanation, whether mundane or extraordinary, lurks behind almost every UFO report. Although Professor Jones referred to a phenomenon, there is actually no such thing as 'the UFO phenomenon'. Instead there are many different phenomena that are often grouped together by the media and the UFO literature under the banner of 'UFO'. A wide variety of different things ultimately cause UFO sightings. These include bright stars and planets, advertising blimps and balloons, hoaxes, concert lights, meteors and space junk burning up in the atmosphere. These UFOs only become Identified Flying Objects after detailed investigation. It is amongst all of this background noise that any genuine UFOs, in the form of alien craft, would be found if they truly existed.

It is true that in some cases, such as the experiences reported by test pilots at Farnborough in 1950 (see Chapter 2), the mysterious phenomena seen by radars at RAF Lakenheath-Bentwaters in 1956 (see Chapter 3) and the lights seen by pilots above the English Channel in 2007 (see Chapter 7), rational explanations are hard to come by. But to say something remains unidentified

does not mean the explanation must be extraterrestrial spacecraft. We lack the one thing that would settle the debate once and for all: tangible evidence, such as wreckage from a crash or an artefact of unquestionable extraterrestrial origin.

'I WANT TO BELIEVE'

This leads me to one of the most enduring beliefs that plays a major role in the modern UFO mystery – the government cover-up. Could that be the reason why concrete proof of the existence of UFOs has proved so elusive? Addressing this subject during the 1979 House of Lords debate, Lord Strabogli expressed the view that the idea of an international conspiracy to hide evidence of alien visitations belonged to the world of James Bond. Throughout modern history, governments have failed to agree on almost every subject; it seems improbable that they could all, successfully and successively, have colluded to hide evidence of alien visitations, both from the public and the scientific community, for more than half a century.

Despite recent moves by the British and other governments to be more open about their limited interest in UFOs, official statements on this subject continue to be widely disbelieved. In July 2008, for example, just two months after The National Archives began releasing the most recent of the Ministry of Defence's UFO files, a survey for The Sun newspaper found that 50 per cent of the respondents said they believed the government might be, or definitely was, concealing evidence from the public. A similar poll conducted in the USA by the Gallup organisation on the fiftieth anniversary of the Roswell incident found 71 per cent of respondents believed the government was hiding knowledge of UFOs.

In November 2011 this will to believe led more than 17,000 Americans to put their signatures on petitions calling for the disclosure of government information on UFOs, and an acknowledgement of contact with extraterrestrials. Responding to both petitions, a White House spokesman said there was: 'no evidence that any life exists outside our planet, or that an extra-terrestrial presence has contacted or engaged any member of the human race.' He added: 'In addition, there is no credible information to suggest that any evidence is being hidden from the public's eye.'[3]

The contents of the MoD's UFO files show that in Britain every new Prime

Minister receives requests and petitions from groups and individuals who demand the release of 'the truth' about UFOs. At a public meeting during the General Election campaign in 2009, Conservative candidate David Cameron was questioned about comments made by former astronaut Ed Mitchell, who is on record as saying he believes the US government is hiding evidence of alien visits to Earth. Cameron's response was to crack a joke (p. 172), but he then admitted he had no idea if any UFO incidents 'had any basis in truth' and promised that if any evidence did exist 'it is certainly not something that any Government should seek to hide from anyone'.[4]

This exchange took place just months after the Labour government released more than 6,000 pages of UFO documents into the public domain via The National Archives. Within those files was an Air Ministry briefing from 1958 in response to a petition that called upon the British government to reveal 'the facts about flying saucers'. The very first UFO desk officer, David West, responded: 'The authors of the campaign are firmly convinced that extraterrestrial manifestations have appeared… [but] as it is not possible to release official information about something which does not exist, it is difficult to satisfy those with preconceived ideas to the contrary.'[5]

Faced with such levels of public distrust, governments have come to realise that honest denials are unlikely to satisfy those convinced that evidence of alien life is being concealed. Such a conspiracy, if it existed, must involve not only all the major world powers but the scientific community too. Writing in 1990 after 50 years studying UFOs and other strange phenomena, Sir Arthur C. Clarke concluded there was no hard evidence that Earth had ever been visited from space. But he said if a visitation ever did occur, at least three independent global radar networks would be aware of it within minutes. He added: '… in the unlikely event that the US, [Russian] and Chinese authorities instantly cooperate to suppress the news, they'll succeed for a maximum of forty-eight hours. How long do you imagine such a secret could be kept?'[6]

Faced with such a deep-rooted will to believe, attempts by both governments and scientists to demystify the subject and educate the public to identify common sources of UFOs are doomed to failure. The available evidence supports the idea that, in Britain at least, government interest in UFOs was always purely pragmatic and motivated by fears over what first Germany and later Russia might be up to. In 2009 when the MoD last published a policy statement on UFOs, it stated their sole interest in the subject was to establish

whether any particular incident had any ‘defence significance’, namely whether UK airspace had been invaded by hostile or unauthorised aircraft. As for visitors from other worlds, the ministry says it has ‘no opinion on the existence or otherwise of extraterrestrial life… however, in over fifty years, no UFO report has revealed any evidence of potential threat to the United Kingdom’.[7]

Personally, I have no doubt this is the truth. All the MoD’s surviving UFO files are now open to the public and their contents will be interpreted differently by everyone who makes an effort to explore them. Believers in flying saucers and government conspiracies will dismiss them as a whitewash and continue to believe the real ‘top secret’ files are being hidden away somewhere else. Sceptics will see them as more evidence that those who see and believe in UFOs are either mistaken or deluded.

I hope those of you who, like me, remain open-minded will come to realise that although the files contain no evidence of alien visitations, they do tell us much about ourselves and the wonders of the planet we inhabit. They are a unique source of extraordinary testimony from ordinary people who have experienced puzzling phenomena both in the sky and on the ground. However, this testimony does not in itself prove the existence of alien craft any more than it establishes the presence of unfamiliar and exotic natural phenomena.

This conclusion is consistent with the views expressed by the author of the MoD’s Condign report, and scientists like R. V. Jones who speculated about ‘rare and unrecognised phenomenon’ as one possible source for UFOs. Even Sir Arthur C. Clarke, who rejected the ‘Extra-Terrestrial Hypothesis’, recognised there ‘may be strange and surprising meteorological, electrical, or astronomical phenomena still unknown to science that are both genuine and unexplained’.[8]

TWO LAMPS IN A DARKENED HALL

During my research for this book, I interviewed a retired MoD scientist who was responsible for checking sighting reports received by the Defence Intelligence Staff during the 1970s. He admitted that a number could not be explained, but said that, given Earth’s status as ‘a rather ordinary little planet’ one of the things he had found ‘strange about the whole business’ was the sheer volume of reports he received, saying: ‘I seem to remember at least half a dozen or more every day. Surely there could not have been that number of

aliens?'[9]

In fact the MoD has received more than 12,000 UFO reports since 1959, a figure that will be only a tiny proportion of the actual total number of sightings, as very few people decide to make an official statement about their experiences. Across the world the total since 1947 must run to millions. This by itself again makes a rather strong case for a rational explanation for most UFO sightings for, put simply, there are just too many UFOs for them all to be alien visitors. What then are the chances that the Earth might be visited today, or even within the short window of time in which human civilisation has existed?

Sketches of alien creatures involved in a galactic war, from a MoD file with the title: ‘Close encounter reports, alien entities, abductions, etc’, opened in 1992. DEFE 24/1943/1

In recent years a new generation of gigantic observatories, including the Hubble Telescope that orbits the Earth, have allowed astronomers to identify thousands of 'exoplanets' orbiting stars in other solar systems. In 2011 the first Earth-like planets were discovered orbiting a star called Kepler-20 that lies over 900 light years away in the constellation of Lyra. But so far none of these alien worlds have been assessed as having surface conditions that would support life as we know it. Nevertheless, in the same year Andrei Finklestein, director of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Applied Astronomy Insitute, predicted that 'life exists on other planets and we will find it within 20 years'.[10] Even if we accept that life must exist elsewhere, the evolution of intelligent life requires an even greater level of chance and probabilities. What is the possibility that intelligent aliens might not only exist but have developed the technology and, more importantly, the motivation to travel millions of light years just to visit us? At present this can only be described as unlikely.

Following the opening of the second tranche of UFO files at The National Archives in 2008, Lord Martin Rees, Astronomer Royal and President of the Royal Society, pointed out that the question of extraterrestrial visits does not, as some believe, rely upon whether other planets capable of hosting life exist in other solar systems. Intelligent humans exist today as the result of a mind-boggling series of accidents and coincidences that may just be unique to our planet. In an article published by The Times, Lord Rees pointed out that we may not even recognise a truly alien intelligence if they had developed an unfamiliar technology or method of communication.[11] This raises questions that are more to do with biology than astronomy. For example, what are the odds that intelligent life that we could recognise would have evolved in a similar fashion elsewhere in the universe, with a completely different throw of cosmic dice? And even if it had, what is the likelihood that two advanced civilisations could exist simultaneously in separate planetary systems close enough for communication or travel to be possible?

The astronomer Patrick Moore has illustrated this problem by comparing it to a darkened hall in which two lamps are installed. If each lamp were programmed to switch on at random for 10 seconds each day, the chances of them both being illuminated at the same time is similar to the likelihood of two civilisations existing at the same time in adjacent solar systems. When you consider the vast distances separating solar systems even within the Milky Way, those odds lengthen still further.

With our current knowledge of the universe, it is impossible at the present time to be absolutely certain. Whether we believe or not, for the time being we must be content with mystery. Indeed, at some level, perhaps that is what we all want, for mystery is a necessary ingredient in our lives. As Neil Armstrong said in his address to the US Congress following the moon landings of 1969:

‘Mystery creates wonder, and wonder is the basis for man’s desire to understand. Who knows what mysteries will be solved in our lifetime, and what new riddles will become the challenge of the new generations?’

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Archive material: Thanks to the Ministry of Defence and in particular Linda Unwin, The British Library (St Pancras and Newspaper Library, Colindale), The Churchill Archive (University of Cambridge), BBC Written Archive, University of Bristol (Professor Cecil Powell archive), The Broadlands Archive (University of Southampton); Imperial War Museum archives.

I wish to thank all my colleagues at Bloomsbury and The National Archives whose hospitality, patience and attention to detail are much appreciated.

Appendix

Section 40

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From: Section 40
Sent: 02 December 2008 15:40
To: Section 40
Subject: TRANSFER TO AIR COMMAND - UFO DESK

Section 40

In the event that I win the lottery over Christmas or walk under a bus, I thought it would be helpful if I gave you some details about the role of the UFO desk beyond the daily mechanics of the job, which are really quite simple.

MoD Role and Position on UFOs and Extraterrestrials

The MoD position on UFOs, aliens and extra terrestrials is quite clear. We know of no evidence to confirm the existence of aliens, spaceships, extra terrestrials etc or if they have visited the earth. However, since the universe is a very large place and mankind has only explored a very small corner of it, we cannot rule out the existence of intelligent life on other planets. We therefore remain open minded on the topic. In the absence of proof either way, this position seems a perfectly sensible one. However, as you can probably guess, the above position does not make very interesting headlines nor, I suspect, would it sell many books.

UFO Reports

Sightings of UFO reports come via three sources. The first, and by far the most popular is via the UFO Hotline where people can leave details of what they have seen. These details are then recorded - currently on spreadsheet by my clerk, but when I move to Air Command, I will be using an Access database. If the person leaving the report gives a name and address, we will write back to them, thanking them for the information and explaining the limits of the MoD role in UFO matters. A copy of this letter with a table containing the relevant sighting details is then filed. The second is written reports from the public, sometimes via their nearest military establishment which are dealt with in the same manner. The third source is from other official bodies such as the CAA or the police.

People often see things in the sky that they cannot explain. Sometimes, as concerned citizens, they report them to us since they believe we will be able to identify what they have seen. Although the UFO desk is the focal point for UFO matters within the MoD (and by extension the whole government) it is not our role to attempt to explain every report we receive and nor are we resourced to do so.

That having been said, from time to time, we may receive a report from aircrew, air traffic control or the police that, in our judgement, may deserve a closer look since they are either trained observers or are sufficiently well versed in aviation matters for their reports to carry more weight and detail than usual. Additionally, a sighting by a great many people (particularly if they are in different locations) may also be worth a look. There are no set criteria or regulations stating under what circumstances we should take a closer look at a report. It is a matter of common sense and judgement. If it is not defence related, it is not our job to get involved.

At the end of the year, a spreadsheet containing details such as date, location and description of any sightings received is placed on the MoD website for the public to view.

UFO Investigations

On the very rare occasions we do take a closer look at a sighting report (less than half a dozen a year) our investigation is likely to entail asking whether anything was seen by either military radar or ATC. We usually do this through CT&UK Ops or, depending on circumstances, a colleague in DAS may suggest a suitable branch to contact. The term "investigation" tends to suggest to the public that there are Top Secret teams of specialist scientists scurrying around the country in a real life version of the X-Files. I am sure it will come as no surprise to you that this is total fiction. It is not unusual to get requests for our "file" on a specific incident. We do not keep separate files on each incident (with the exception of a handful from the early 1990s) and in any case, the documentation is likely to be limited to a few e-mails.

UFO Correspondence

The majority of correspondence on UFOs is composed of requests for information about various sightings or

The last Ministry of Defence UFO desk officer, Paul Webb, summarises the 'daily mechanics' of his job in this perceptive email, written exactly one year before the post was abolished. DEFE 24/2087/1

[redacted] the MoD documents about a particular UFO incident (rumours abound of crashed UFOs, Top Secret bases or alien remains). Not surprisingly, the majority are now logged as FOI requests and dealt with accordingly. TOs and MQs are not very frequent but do tend ub from time to time. A PQ is an extremely rare beast. I do not recall answering any in the past two years.

FOI Requests

I expect to receive at least 100 FOI requests a year on the subject of UFOs. By taking the decision to place details of sightings on the website and later by proactively placing the UFO files in The National Archives, we have been able to reduce the time spent answering requests since much of the information is already in the public domain and people can simply be directed there.

UFO Files

In late 2007 Ministerial approval was given for DAS and DIS to place their closed UFO files in The National Archives. The files are prepared for release in accordance with the principles of the FOI Act. The UFO Desk has transferred some 24 DAS files to date and on only one occasion (a misfiled document) has it been necessary to use a redaction other than s.40. The files are released in roughly chronological order, which is administratively easier and allows the "story" of the MoD's involvement with UFOs to be rolled out in a logical sequence. There are some 60 plus files due for transfer to The National Archives in 2009 and another 70 plus in 2010. As the files are rolled out, the public is getting a better feel for what our interest in UFOs actually is, rather relying on more lurid claims, but this does not, and probably never will, stop rumours of secret research, mysterious organisations or, I was delighted to see, that the files we are releasing are not the 'real' files.

Redaction of these files is a very time consuming task, but it is made considerably simpler (and faster) by the use of redaction software. It is my role to redact files myself, and also to act as quality control on the files redacted by my staff or indeed DIS. Once I am satisfied the files are in a fit state and have been marked appropriately, I then pass them to Info DMem for double checking and for them to take on the task of formally transferring the files. As stated above, the transfer of the UFO files to The National Archives is slowly making the task of answering FOI requests much easier.

Ufology and Ufologists

Ufology is a widely accepted term to describe the study of the UFO phenomena. Those that study ufology are often known as ufologists. Ufology is a broad term that covers a spectrum of opinion that ranges from those that are convinced the earth has been visited by extra terrestrials and that the MoD is covering up the fact, through those that are simply interested in the subject but not certain what to believe, to total sceptics. The subject does attract attention from individuals who are interested in it as a social phenomenon and carry out research from that perspective of urban myths and beliefs.

Ufology is therefore not uniform in its views and this can give rise to strong passions. The MoD tries to keep clear of any affiliation to any particular lobby or individual, since proactive engagement with UFO groups would simply serve to perpetuate the suspicion that the MoD has a deeper interest in the subject than it actually has. Whilst we are perfectly willing to provide factual information if requested, we try to steer clear of any statement that could be considered as either supporting or criticising any particular individual, theory, book or magazine article. There is a considerable industry surrounding UFOs and the MoD does not want to be drawn into allegations of favouritism or bias which might affect a particular individuals sales in either direction. In particular we do not wish to be drawn into arguments between individuals, which can be quite vitriolic and about which there is no defence inherent.

UFO Research and UFO Experts

The MoD is not involved in scientific research into extraterrestrial life. We do not have any experts in UFOs (by which most people that contact us really mean when classified pic). The closest we have to the post of "UFO Expert" is probably my own, but this has always been a generalist, non-technical, post with the emphasis on correspondence with the public. The MoD does, of course, have experts in a great many subjects from weather to radar, to missiles and the UFO desk can, if it sees fit, ask their advice.

Press Interest

Press interest tends to be sporadic, but is usually at its height in the quiet summer months or when The National Archives issue a press release about the latest UFO additions to their collection.

Finally, and somewhat ironically, given the assumed pervasive dark zone of the MoD, whilst I have naturally [redacted]

[redacted] built up some a degree of knowledge of various UFO cases as part of my tenure in this post, I often find the best source for information is simply to google the internet!

I hope the above helps put my job in perspective.

[redacted]
DAS-FOI
[redacted]

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AFTERWORD

1 R. V. Jones, 'The Natural Philosophy of Flying Saucers', Physics Bulletin 19 July 1968
2 Hansard (Parliamentary debates, House of Lords), 18 January 1979
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4 The Times, 27 January 2009
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6 Ben Bova and Byron Preiss (editors), First Contact: The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Headline, 1990
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10 The Guardian, 27 June 2011
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SELECTED ONLINE RESOURCES

The United Kingdom

The National Archives:

The UFO page contains an online archive of Ministry of Defence files released by The National Archives between 2008 and 2012. These can be downloaded as PDF files at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ufos. This website also contains a research guide and a collection of podcasts that add context to the file contents. Earlier files featured in this book can be found by searching the National Archives catalogue at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue and ordered online.

The Ministry of Defence

A selection of UFO documents can be downloaded from the MoD's Freedom of Information Publication Scheme. These include a tabulated list of sighting reports received by the Ministry between 1997 and 2009 and examples of responses to Freedom of Information requests on UFOs and related subjects. Just type 'UFO' into the search engine at : http://tinyurl.com/7j26o5l.PDF copies of the Defence Intelligence Staff (DIS) Condign report on 'UFOs in the UK Air Defence Region' (see Chapter 6) are available here: http://tinyurl.com/kqll2

The United States of America

The National Archives and Records Administration

The US National Archives has a UFO page at http://www.archives.gov/foia/ufos.html and holds the Project Blue Book archive on microfilm at the National Archives II in Maryland. It also holds copies of The Roswell Report: Fact vs Fiction in the New Mexico desert (HQ USAF, 1994) and The Roswell Report: Case Closed (Washington DC, 1997). The latter two documents can be viewed online via the Galvin Library at the Illinois Institute of Technology at: http://contrails.iit.edu/history/roswell, while samples from the Project Blue Book files are available via the privately run Project Blue Book Archive at: http://www.bluebookarchive.org/

A number of US government agencies have released UFO documents under the Freedom of Information Act via online reading rooms.

A **United States Department of Defense** policy statement on UFOs can be downloaded at: http://www.defense.gov/faq/pis/16.html

A **United States Air Force** fact sheet can be found at: http://www.af.mil/information/roswell/index.asp

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

See: http://www.foia.cia.gov/ufo.asp; this collection of documents catalogues UFO information collected by the agency from the late 1940s through the early 1990s. This page also provides a link to historian Gerald Haines' paper, 'A die-hard issue: CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-1990', originally published by Studies in Intelligence (1997).

Federal Bureau of Investigation

The FBI received many UFO reports between 1947 and 1954 and worked for a time with the US Air Force to investigate them. In 2011 a selection of these files were released on the agency's online reading room at: http://vault.fbi.gov/UFO

National Security Agency (NSA)

This US intelligence agency is the equivalent of Britain's GCHQ and is responsible for the interception and analysis of foreign communications. A

collection of UFO-related documents released by the NSA in response to FOI requests can be found here: http://www.nsa.gov/public_info/declass/ufo/index.shtml

Elsewhere in the world:

The National Library and Archives of Canada

This archive holds 9,500 documents relating to UFOs collected by Department of National Defence, the Department of Transport, National Research Council and Royal Canadian Mounted Police from 1947 until the early 1980s: http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/ufo/index-e.html

Centre National D'Études Spatiales

GEIPAN, the French Space Agency unit responsible for research and investigations of 'unidentified aerospace phenomena' (UAPs) placed its archives online in March 2007 at: http://www.cnes-geipan.fr/geipan/ipn.html

Ejército del Aire

The Spanish Air Force UFO files were declassified in 1992. Their contents are described in an article by private researcher, Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos: http://www.anomalia.org/declass.htm

The National Archives of Australia

Royal Australian Air Force UFO files can be accessed via: http://www.naa.gov.au/ The RAAF first opened their files in 1982 to researcher Bill Chalker of the Australian UFO Research Network. He describes their content at: http://www.auforn.com/MilitaryFiles.html

Royal New Zealand Air Force

The New Zealand Ministry of Defence/RNZAF files on UFO and UAS (unidentified aerial sightings) were released in 2010. The files can be downloaded at: http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/4486327/Original-files-NZs-UFO-sightings

Archives for UFO Research

This Swedish site can be found at http://www.afu.info/

The Italian Centre for UFO Studies
See http://www.arpnet.it/ufo/english.htm

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